

The Offering

UMass Lowell Literary Society - 2002



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The Offering

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A Product of the UMass Lowell Literary Society

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Spring, 2002

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UMass Lowell

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Russ' Old Rustbucket

Sean Conway

He came out of the grocery store and into a blast of summer heat with four plastic bags hanging from his fingertips and another bag cradled in his arm because the cheap handle had snapped. It was full of little glass jars of baby food and he had almost lost the whole damn thing back inside the store. Runty little bag-boy had over packed everything. Baby food jars are light, by themselves, but toss a couple dozen into one bag and you're asking for trouble.

Maura had called him at the car lot earlier in the afternoon and given him a list of things to get for the birthday cookout they were throwing on Saturday. Kaitlin was a year old already. *A year.* Jesus. Russ had written down everything that she had told him to pick up, but then, typically, he left the list behind when he ducked out of work early, and then had to resort to his memory, which wasn't very good to begin with. He was sure he had forgotten something, and tried to figure out what it was as he crossed over toward his vehicle. It was the only car they had now since Maura had banged up the Rav4, and while he gritted his teeth against a bead of sweat that was tracking down the center of his back and making him itch, he thought that today would have been a good day to let her drive him into work so that she could have his car to get all this shit done on her own.

He was so distracted with the missing list and the sweat and the disintegrating plastic bag that he almost went to the wrong car. His was a dark blue Isuzu Rodeo, but there he was standing at the hatchback of a dark green Nissan Pathfinder, three cars down from his. He huffed through his nose, annoyed, and readjusted the bag that balanced between his forearm and chest. Half of the vehicles in this park-

ing lot were SUV's—maybe even more than half. It was all anyone bought anymore at his car lot.

With his one free thumb he began dipping into his pants pocket for the car keys, and that was when he saw, in the aisle directly across from his Rodeo, an old black Toyota Supra. At first he had merely glimpsed it from the corner of his eye, but immediately his whole head turned to look at it. Almost instinctively his eyes dropped to the rear bumper, where a remaining corner of a faded Boston Celtics sticker told him that, yes, he was looking at his old car, his *first* car.

He hadn't seen it in, what, almost ten years, maybe nine, but there was really never any doubt that it was his. Even before he looked for the bumper sticker, he knew. And though the paint was dull and there was a red pin stripe running not quite evenly down the sides of it, and though it was so diseased with brown rust that it looked kind of like a German Shepherd, he knew that he was looking at his very first car.

Even in the July heat he had to shake off a subtle chill that tingled down the back of his neck. Without taking his eyes off it, he crouched and eased the shopping bags onto the baking pavement at the rear of his car. Three or four baby jars rolled off his arm and, surprisingly, did not break. He scooped them up and stood them in a line next to the bags. Then he went over to his old car, the stunned look on his face turning quickly into a big, goofy grin.

He loosened his tie and undid the top button of his work shirt—his sleeves were already rolled—then stepped around the old car in a wide circle, hands in his pockets, shaking his head in disbelief. It wasn't just the fact that he was now living in a town a good twenty minutes from the town he grew up in that floored him; it was more the fact that this car was still on the road. It was an '88 Supra. His older brother, Jimmy, had bought it almost new, a year old, right after high school graduation. Two years later, when Russ got his license at 17, Jimmy bought himself a new Mustang and sold Russ the Supra for short money.

Back then it was the sharpest car at school. Most of the other guys were either driving their parents' cars to school or their own barely-running junk heaps, or else driving nothing at all and hitching rides or taking the bus. He used to park it along the tennis court fence, away from the other cars, paranoid that some idiot was going to bang his car door into it or something. It was so shiny black that on bright days it looked like the sun was actually inside the car's paint, beaming out from within. The four chrome wheels made it glimmer even more, as did the chrome dual-exhaust tail pipes.

He cupped his hands around his eyes and put his forehead up against the driver's side glass. The leather bucket seats were dull and even looked a little cracked,

age-cracks. Dirty gray duct tape patched the middle of the driver's seat, peeling away on one side in a brown curl and showing the dusty stuffing underneath. That hadn't been there before. There was also another cigarette burn on the black vinyl material that wrapped around the stick-shift, and that was new, too. Then he noticed that whoever owned the car now had put in a new stereo system and CD player. He had wanted to put a new system in it way back when but never had the money to get it done. This one looked pretty nice. The floor on the passenger side was littered with CD cases—Rob Zombie, The Offspring, Tool, Nine Inch Nails. He had heard of some of these guys but couldn't match them to any particular songs. Back then it was just a factory radio, not even a cassette player. He had thousands of tapes, too, that he listened to in his bedroom or on his Walkman. Whenever he rode along in someone else's car, he always appreciated the fact that they could actually listen to exactly what they wanted to listen to—just pop the tape in and crank it. Russ's Rodeo had come with a CD player that he had never once used.

There was a white and blue garter hanging from the rear-view mirror. A lot of guys used to do that, hang their prom date's garter in their cars. Russ never did it because it would have distracted him and made him think about sex all the time, and he thought about sex enough as it was. Which made him look into the back seat. The small back seat. He had lost his virginity back there, claustrophobic as that now sounded. It was with his first real girlfriend, Sara, who he had met during the first weeks of class at community college. He used to stare at her in the cafeteria, when he was sitting by himself in the morning eating cereal and she was sitting a few tables over with her friends. She used to glance over at him once in awhile but he thought it was because she could feel him gawking like an idiot. Whenever he got caught his face burned red and he looked down into his cereal bowl.

One day he was standing behind her in line when she was trying to pay for a large hot chocolate that cost a buck fifteen. She didn't have the fifteen cents and Russ was quick to pull a clumsy handful of change out of his pocket. She started saying hi to him after that and from there they ended up studying together and then, miraculously, dating.

Russ lifted his head and watched a girl, probably early twenties, coming across the parking lot. He took a step back from the car, not wanting to get caught by the owner with his greasy face pressed up against the window. But this was not the owner; she passed by with a cell phone to her ear without so much as a glance his way. Nevertheless, Russ moved away from the car, backwards, looking again at the Celtics sticker that someone had tried to scrape off and then given up on. The license plate next to it looked all wrong, and he realized it was because it was not *his* license plate, his old one. 228-LSE. He still remembered it.

His heel kicked a baby food jar and he spun around, startled. He had forgotten for a moment that he was moving backwards. The jar rolled under the Rodeo, and he had to get down onto his hands and knees to retrieve it. But there was an oil smudge on the pavement and he didn't want to ruin his white shirt, so he got back up, brushed himself off, and loaded the grocery bags into the hatchback. When he came around to the side of the car he crouched down again and, reaching behind the rear wheel, grabbed the jar.

He fumbled with the door lock and then climbed inside, starting the engine. The A/C blasted in his face, warm at first, but quickly going cool and then cold. He adjusted it so that the vents faced down, so he would not get too cold too quick. The Supra hadn't had any A/C, that was for sure. Hottest car he ever sat in. He used to hang his head out the window like a dog, and Sara would tell him he was a freak.

He didn't go anywhere. He just sat there, adjusting the rear-view mirror so that it was aimed directly on the front end of the Supra. It was amazing how much had happened in or around that car. He guessed that was what happened when you had a girlfriend but no apartment, no privacy. He had listened to Sara tell him that she was falling in love with him when they were sitting in that car, and then, a week or so later, he had finally returned the sentiment. Again, in the car. They held their screaming arguments in there as well, then made up, kissing and hugging. Every weekend he flipped back the bucket seats and cleaned out the McDonald's bags, random articles of clothing, school books, and occasional condom wrapper that had accumulated during the week. He practically lived in it.

He still had the car and the girlfriend when he finished his coursework at the community college. His plan was to transfer over to Salem State, and in fact he was enrolled at Salem for the fall. But he was holding out because, the previous winter, Sara's parents divorced and her mother and thirteen year-old sister moved to a town outside of Raleigh, North Carolina. Sara stayed up in Massachusetts with her Dad so she could finish school. But in the spring Sara started sending out college applications to schools down there—University of North Carolina, NC State, even Duke just for the hell of it. Russ encouraged her but secretly hoped that she would get turned down by all of them and decide to stay up here and maybe go to Salem State with him.

But UNC accepted her. Her plan was to ship some her things down there and then fly down the first week of August, but Russ nixed that idea by insisting that he drive her. And that's what they did. Took one final road trip, seven hours one day and six the next. The first day was so full of conversation and laughter that they never even bothered to turn on the radio. The second day, though, was remarkably somber and quiet. They blamed the long ride, being tired, sick of sitting in the car.

But Russ knew it was more than that. They both knew that today was the beginning of the end. Then he got a flat tire somewhere in the monotony of route 95 in Virginia, and while on his knees fighting with the rusted lug nuts Sara, standing on the hilly shoulder, took his picture. She was laughing and teasing him, trying to keep the mood light. Russ turned and pulled his faced into a big smile, then flipped his middle finger at the camera.

He stayed almost a full week down in Raleigh at her mother's new house and checked out Sara's new apartment in Chapel Hill. They said goodbye to one another on a warm and breezy afternoon the second week of August, their arms wrapped around each other against the hood of the Supra, gently brushing at each other's tears with their lips, making promises to each other that seemed unrealistic the moment he stepped away.

The worst part was stopping—that was when he felt most alone. She had made him a small cooler of sandwiches and sodas, and he was grateful for at least that. He did not want to stop. The blur of the pavement was good, kept the world a numbing blur. But then he pulled off the highway late that night at a cheap motel outside of Baltimore. The mattress was lumpy and smelled suspiciously of urine, and he could hear somebody snoring on the other side of the thin wall above his head. He turned the volume on the TV up in an attempt to block it out, as well as the whine of the big rigs darting down 95.

He was still awake at three-thirty in the morning, throat tight and a threat of tears stinging his sinuses. Swallowing dryly, he got up, stepped into his sneakers and left, relieved to be back on the blurry road, back in the comfort of the Supra's bucket seat, that familiar smell of the peach air freshener that Sara had been replacing every few months. He drove through the dark, toward the morning sun, headachy from a lack of sleep. His mouth was dry and tasted sour, and his stomach rumbled, but he would not stop today. He needed to keep going.

He watched in the Rodeo's mirror two people coming across the parking lot and toward the Supra. One was a kid of about seventeen or eighteen, with an almost shaved head and what looked like pink-tinted sunglasses low on his nose. He was holding his girlfriend's hand, a petite thing with short, choppy hair who looked like she was too young to have a boyfriend. They broke apart as they came around the car to get into their respective sides, but even then held hands an extra step, arms outstretched, reluctant to let go of one another.

Russ bit absently on the inside of his cheek and watched the car gun into life, a quick cough of blue smoke kicking out of the exhaust pipes. Even with the Rodeo's windows up he could hear, even feel, the bass of the Supra's new stereo system. He held the jar of baby food in his hand, the one he had reached under the car to pick up.

He passed it from palm to palm, watching the Supra jerk back out of the parking space too fast, sit for a moment perfectly framed in Russ's side mirror while the driver fought with the gearshift, and then, finally, slide away.

He continued to stare at the empty space for a long moment, until eventually a Ford Bronco took the spot. He found himself wondering if he still had that picture of him changing the tire and flipping the bird to the camera. It was probably buried somewhere in one of those boxes down in the cellar. He might, one of these days, see if he could dig it out.

The jar of baby food hit his thumb and fell into his lap. He picked it up and read the label. Peaches. Twisting the cap, it came open with that loud pop that he loved, and he brought it to his nose. Smelled like the Supra used to. There was a little glob of orange mush on the underside of the cap, and he touched his tongue to it. It tasted pretty good. Then he put the cap back on, slipped the jar into one of the bags, and shifted the car into drive. He pulled the Rodeo out of the parking space, reaching behind him blindly for the seat belt strap. His girls were at home, waiting for him.

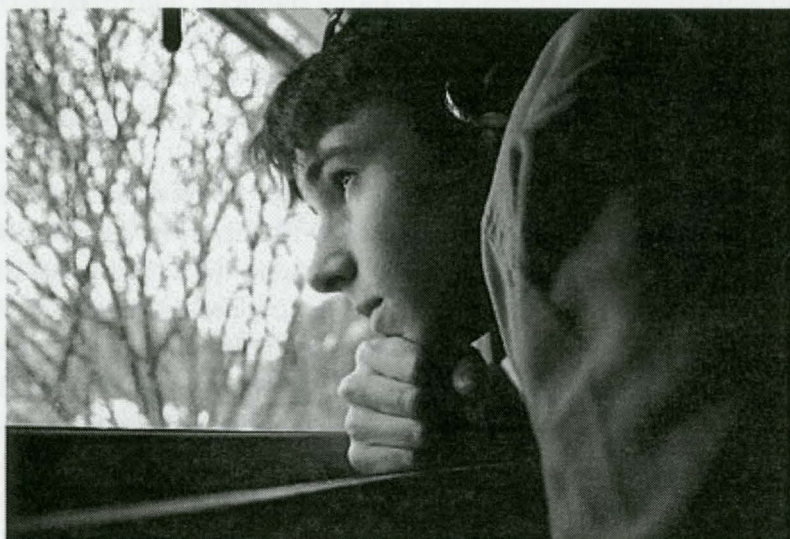


Photo by : Adam Fraser

Violet

Lauren Passot

Part I

"Oh Violet! Look at the birds! Look at the birds, Violet!"
Last Fall behind Gladys' exclamations
And Violet's dust
On the bus
Now, Spring
"Look at the food he's bought, Violet!
Must last 'im two weeks!"
Hatted man nods in bewilderment
"Oh ya ya, Oh ya ya, it must."
Violet silent
Her cohort's wig is matted
Brown lipstick eyebrow stripes
Light make-up
Heavy tight-in-the-shoulders
inside-out looking coat.
Gladys always quoting her father's decaying significance
Now: "My father always said, "God'll watch over you
And he'll want you some day."
Violet, in her eighties peers up
Violet, the Romanian Orthodox woman of 17th century hut-dom
with blue brown flowered scarf on her head.
Praying the town's scoundrel won't see a lobe.
The side of Violet's finger tapping at the one flesh spot.
Softly ironed
direct remnant of her birth
vallied behind bulldog ripples

created by elbow grease on the kitchen table.
And there, as she bends to tug at her scarf
The Neck's back that a few boys
have seen and gathered
Now just a pearl in her oatmeal.

Part II

Bus driver manipulating the
Serving tray of a rear-view mirror
Laps up a college girl.
Violet, an innocent bystander
And credible witness
Quickly throws her eyes out the window.

April

Kate Hanson

Today I watched as green bled silently through the earth.
A crisp, thin, bed sheet of vitality across an open field.

And I was back in a place my bones knew;
With my stutter strut,
I was a disgrace to rhythm, a violation to feet.

And my breath came out in fractured segments,
So that I would fit
Wherever I decided to breathe.

I was seven days weak.
Madness marched March through my veins,
And all along I was tracing my seams,

Feeling for a reason,
Searching for a sign of life.

The wind was unrelenting,
As it brushed up from under me
And pushed itself violently into my lungs

I thought I'd pray for the sky to blow away
And then in one great copious burst
Winter came out in one breath.



Photo by : John Belanger

Sitting on the 4:10 in Lowell, Massachusetts

Patrick Murphy

Sitting on the four-ten, the evening becomes
Obscure and shadowy
As violet drapes over the vermillion city.
Below me the steel tracks that once ran to Maine
Are still and still beneath them a mason cover
Harbors hard water that runs smooth against
Miles of cool blue stone.
Behind me,
Fields of factories and smokestack trees
Where the moonlit water pushes through
For a chance to make flywheels move again.
To bring gray shadows back to brown photos in brick cities.
It's back to the blue-collar pub for one last drink.

Mare Imbrium

Matt Briggs

It doesn't mean I have to do it that way
I know that's how they got across the point they were trying to
But that's not what I care about
To me this is not some structured analytical composition of form
Broken into pieces of words selected and seeds
Words collected over time
Rather a piece of purity from soul
A conceptual breath of life a concept
A slice
An allusion to illusions of pi
A drop of water
A heartbeat
A river only to be stepped in once
A live show
A single radio station on the dial
An insight to the inside
To feel not like the well read
Bull fed
Institutionalized transitional fears of being
Wrong for differences
When its light waves
Sunrays
Moonbeams of ocean's light
Born in Mare Imbrium and
Empty caverns of sorrow
Showering down from the heavens
Channeled to us from the seven sisters of the Pleiades

17



Photo by : Adam Fraser

Goofy Foot (First Chapter of a Novel)

David Daniel

I looked up and saw the old guy standing in my office doorway, pulling a sawed-off shotgun out of a paper bag. He was flushed and a little wild-eyed, and breathing hard from the three-flight climb. He took a step toward my desk, where my morning coffee steamed in the cup. "You're Mr. Rasmussen..."

I threw my hands high. "Whoa," I said.

"I'm gonna give it to you!"

My heart was banging off the old tin ceiling. "Hold on."

"It's gotta be now!"

My gaze was on the ugly snout of the shotgun. In the sunlight sliced by the Venetian blinds—maybe the last sunlight I'd ever see—I saw it was double-barrel, big gauge. The paper bag was a long thin one, the kind that hero sandwiches come in. He tossed the bag on my desk. Forget heroes; I was thinking of body bags. Another mad dog fizzing with rage and looking for someone to blame.

"Mr. Rasmussen—" he said.

He knew my name. I tried to run his face. The loser in a bitter divorce case I'd done investigative work for? An insurance cheat I'd exposed? A bitter cop?

And that's when I recognized him.

He worked in the pizza shop around the corner. Tony's, what else? A nice old guy, I'd always figured. So he'd cracked. Standing in the Bessemer blast of the pizza oven in July and one too many people saying "Hold the anchovies," and he'd wiggled and come through the building at 15 Kearney Square—the Fairburn Building, if you like irony—looking for people to shoot on sight. Except nobody was around. The city golf tournament was on, and there wasn't a businessman, accountant or

lawyer to be found; they were all out whooping it up at Mount Pleasant or at Vesper. Not private eyes, though. There was one working, and this old guy had found him.

"Look," I said. I was still searching for an icebreaker, still matching stares with the shotgun.

I heard the siren then—had been hearing it for at least a minute—dying away now on Merrimack Street outside. Would he smoke me before the cops arrived? Take me hostage? He stepped closer, pushing the office door shut behind him. He said, "It ain't working' no more, Mr. Rasmussen."

I blinked.

"I was cleaning the vent over the oven. I found it on top the ceiling." I saw now that the weapon was dusty, rust-spotted. "One a them dropped ceilings," he said. "A gun I don't know where it come from, and it's lying up there. You're some kind of cop, ain't you? I don't like guns. Guns scare me. I brung it for you to get rid of it."

I wanted to kiss him. I read it then. He'd found an old gun and it had spooked him and he didn't know what to do about it, so he'd stuck the barrel in a paper bag and gone around the corner because he'd once seen the gold lettering on my third floor window that said Alex Rasmussen, Private Investigations, only someone had spotted him and punched 911. Carrying an unlicensed firearm, even in a sandwich bag, was a mandatory one-year jail term in Massachusetts. And if this seemed silly, stranger things had happened. I couldn't see the nice old guy coping with the hassle. Or me losing my ability to earn a living.

I heard the stairwell door at the end of the hallway click open. I heard footsteps along the corridor tiles. "Give me that," I said. "Quick."

I took the shotgun. I looked around and grabbed an idea. Maybe it'd play, or maybe it'd get us both a year. The outer door to my waiting room opened. I yanked open the coat closet and stood the shotgun in the dark back corner, behind my trench coat. Then I grabbed the length of flex hose on my vacuum cleaner and twisted the black plastic tube off the end. I shut the closet door.

I had the two-foot long tube on the desk as the inner office door flew open and a uniform came around the side in a crouch, his nine mm two-handed in front of him. He was nobody from my days on the Job—the Lowell faces kept getting younger. He was panting, too: nerves, probably, or the three-floor climb. He knew the moves, though.

"Down boy!" I said.

He stepped inside, his hand collared around the thick rubber grip of the nine, twitching the piece this way and that. He looked around. Looked at the old man. "Where's the gun?"

"In the bottom drawer. What's going on?"

He covered me and came around. "Don't move." His tension rang off the metal file cabinets. With his left hand he brought his walkie-talkie to his mouth. "Okay, I'm here on the third floor, suite three-fifteen."

"I'm coming up," said a second voice. "The elevator working?"

The cop looked at me. "The elevator work?"

"No," I said.

"No," he told the other voice. The voice cursed and signed off.

"Okay, put the weapon on the desk," the cop ordered.

I unlocked and opened the drawer carefully. I reached past the fifth of Gilbey's and lifted up the .38 Smith & Wesson I keep there. I drew it out by the trigger guard. "It's legal," I said and set it on the worn linoleum desktop.

"The other, I'm talking."

"Other?"

"Rifle or shotgun." The nine twitched toward my visitor. The old guy looked ready to jump from his skin. "Someone saw you come up the block hauling steel."

"Hauling steel?" I said. "They say things like that at the police academy?"

The nine leapt my way. "Knock off the crap. What's your name?"

I told him.

"You?" he asked the old guy.

"Vito."

"It's in a paper bag," the cop said.

"A paper bag?" I made a sound that I hoped sounded like recognition and relief. "Just now?" I let out a breath. As I lifted the plastic pipe, I retrieved the bag. The rest was easy: my pal Vito had borrowed my vacuum cleaner and forgot to return the attachment till now. The cop used his walkie-talkie and nixed backup. To justify the hike, I supposed, he asked to see paper for the Smith and I was happy to oblige. He looked as relieved as we were.

"How come you're not out at tournament with the rest of the city?" I asked him when he'd holstered his weapon. "You're missing the tee-offs."

"I might ask you the same."

"And give crime a holiday?"

When the cop was gone, Vito clamped my right hand in a damp double handshake. "I knew you was the one to come to."

"I'm him," I said, my voice finally down in the range where it belonged.

"You take care of the gun, eh? I don't want."

"Okay. I'll take care of it."

He was still pumping my hand. "You come by. Vito make you a pizza, special. Whatever you like. You like anchovies?"

I didn't say a word.

When he'd gone too, I locked the outer door. I'd had enough company for one morning. I brought the shotgun out from the closet. It was a Parker Brothers, according to the name etched on the housing; not the board game makers, I guessed, though it wasn't a name I'd ever heard of. It was 16-gauge, ugly as sin and as empty as my safe deposit box. Termites had been working on giving it a pistol grip. Under the corrosion, I could make out some scrollwork, but the piece was in dire need of oil and bluing. I tried to remember what the pizza joint had been before it was Tony's and came up with a string of grease pits.

If the shotgun was wanted in some old crime, I'd check it out quietly with a sergeant I knew on the force. If it was clean, I'd take it home for dismantling and disposal. Or maybe the broker in the hawkshop downstairs would give me ten bucks for it. For now, it could rust in peace in the closet. As I shut the door, the telephone rang.

"Are you Mr. Rasmussen?" It was a woman asking this time. She had a nice voice. Refined and a little uncertain.

"Yes, I am."

"Do you—I know it sounds crazy—my name's Mrs. Campbell, by the way. Paula Campbell. Do you make house calls?"

"Where to, Mrs. Campbell?"

"I'm in Apple Valley. Would it be possible to have someone come out?"

"What's the nature of the business?"

"My daughter may be missing."

"You're not sure?"

"Well, I know where she is...or who she's with, at least. I just haven't heard from them in a few days. I know it's probably nothing. She tends to turn off her cell phone when I call."

"How old is your daughter?"

"Sixteen."

I could have pressed on with smart questions: who was she with? where? told her to start at the beginning; but I was still shaky from my face-to-face with a pair of guns. Besides, I knew enough about voices to judge people by them. Paula Campbell's told me she was trying to mask real worry. I got the address and said I'd be out.

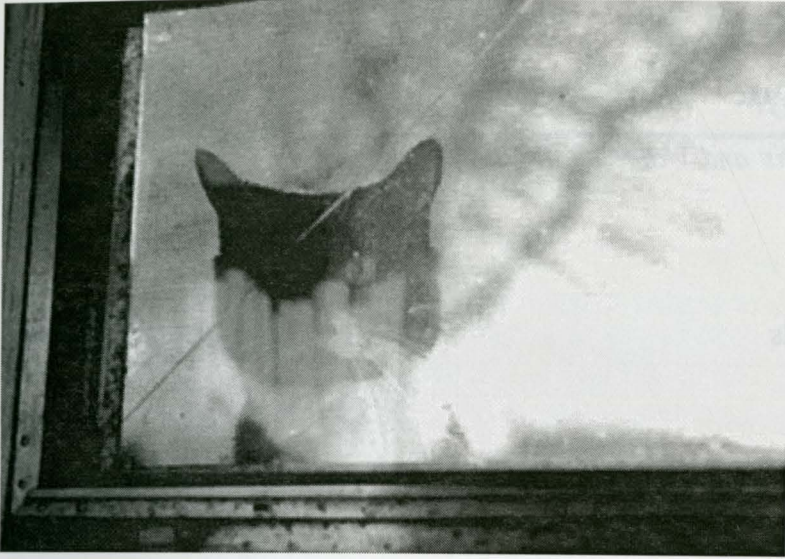


Photo by : Matthew Briggs

A Poetic Dialogue

Jonathan Martin and Vanessa Cargill

some ancient parting
of intricately knit souls
mends in our smiling

—

*brown eyes searching blue
meet at the horizon;
butterfly kiss*

—

peering lovingly out
at ancient brown eyes
which contain his soul

—

*stardust at sunrise
sails lazily, counting
my thoughts of you.*

—

her words are aloft
scattered birds in my sky –
I must buy more seed

—

*my tranquil soul
wonders at the peace found
in our shared verse*

—
*a chain of haiku
wondrous new and lovely-
like endless valentines*

—
*improvising life
staves speak of new beauty.
share these with me.*

—
*of your memories,
be they blithe or terrible —
sing me asleep on these*

Heron at Sunrise

Matt Briggs

Red yellow.
Feeding, feeding.
Sparkle, sparkle,
Red and yellow.
Stand on one leg,
Stand.
Dipping head in
Liquid land.
Land and stay.
Fly and go.
Go and stay,
Stay and go.
I row and row and row,
Battling the river flow.
Red and yellow go.
Purple sky and
You fly and go,
So I go too,
To house of
Red and Yellow.

Cool Blue

Paul Marion

St. Lucia, St. Lulu, blue-green and green-blue — there's an ooh in the blue air, in the o-round mouth on the white deck of the cruise liner chasing a tank ship bound for the oil farm at Castries. Dark parts of the seascape like indigo ink slurred thru turquoise fields in the bay. Jet-lets of spume way off shore — the dip boat, no banana boat, shipped out. Each villa boasts a few plain conch shells, T-Rex of seashells, grail we never find up north, bony case with smooth pink lining. Each villa is a conch of white walls, terra-cotta floors. With its owner away, we snowbirds claim the showy chassis for a couple of hot weeks. Julia, at the front desk, thirty years old this month, says Nelson Mandela said if he had to choose a place to live outside of South Africa, it would be St. Lucia, where he could sleep with doors open. It's so calm, she says. When I tell her I admire Derek Walcott's poems, she says his birthday is January 26th, which is mine, too, and that he'll be home next month for the island's Independence Day party. He may write something special. When I mention his teaching in Boston, she nods, "Yes, the Nobel Laureate." Julia asks if my hometown is "cool," calm, she explains, not too busy like New York City.

Hewanorra

Paul Marion

One nimble gecko scaling a mosquito net remains the only lizard we've seen in a week on the island whose old name means "where the iguana is found." Purple hummingbird sips ginger, heliconia, hibiscus. Fan palm rustles, banana leaves shrug. Doves hoo and hoo. Labrelotte Bay gleams blue-silver, sun chinning the hillside inlaid with red-roofed, whitewashed villas, its light bleaching distant sailboats. In a yellow kayak, George Charles digs the sea with a two-ended paddle, sprinting to his dive boat. He hauls up the transport, then sets off with bup-bup-bupping engine. All day he'll taxi tourists to St. Lucia's primo reef, full of darting rubies and doubloons whose reflections fuse after cloudburst to make half a water-colored hoop joining Morne Fortune to Gros Islet.

Hibiscus Lane

Paul Marion

Halfway into the bay a wave rears like a white chess knight, mane flaring. Nature's small-engine sound, the whirr spun from a metal web, all fired carbon, shaped mineral, plug-spark, all real to the feel, some handmade combo jazzed and razzed like an oil drum in its new plinking form — the volcano to my left served stone gravy. I like to see banana trees, something different to write home about. Hands of bananas green, hard, clustered. Are we grown like bananas, cropping up each season, ripening each winter, ready to be plucked, the wrinkled sheets our peels, all that's left after a week? Curved clay tiles colored like plant pots and pipes, same roofing across old mission California, hard shells first formed on the shins of early builders, tiles the color of tomato-dyed pasta. Wind-surfer sails in the middle distance, his investigations, not so deep, need not be shallow — he requires less: water-spider, finch, reed. Light is not a white enough word for the color of air around the terra-cotta patio — no, light doesn't qualify. For the tone, the shine, the tropic time-zone bleached wash, "bright" is a better choice.

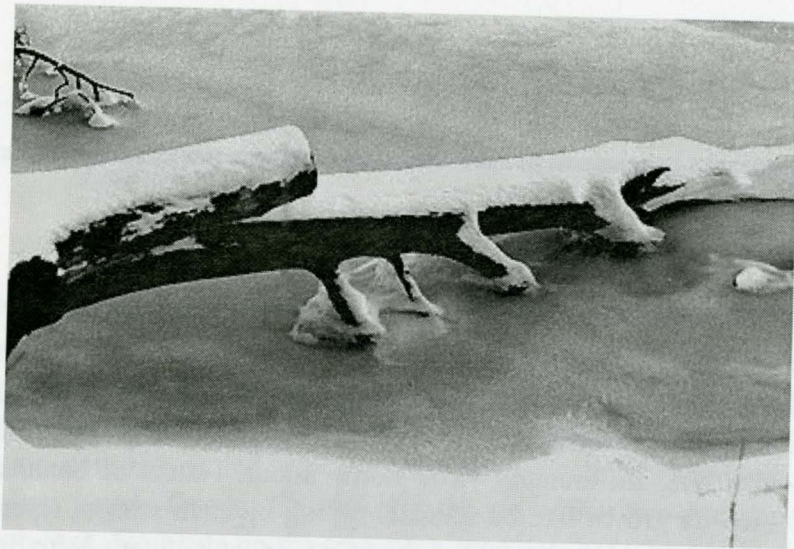


Photo by : Jonathan Martin

Snow

Jaime Weida

The boy had been running for some time before the stitch of stabbing pain in his side finally brought him to a gasping halt. The anger and offense had been hot and bloody inside him, and he had clenched his hands into fists and trembled precariously on the edge of the moment. He wanted with violent hands to blot out the words that had been spoken against him, with bone and nails to destroy the owner of the mocking eyes. He was just barely able to restrain himself, but the fury in his viscera demanded he do something for propitiation, so he had run.

When his breath came easily again and the dancing spots before his eyes had disappeared, the boy was finally able to look about him. He had run far, and was deep in the woods behind the school. It was still snowing, and the trees and ground were thickly coated with white. He listened keenly, head cocked to one side like a doe or a bird, limbs nearly as thin and sparse in this alertness as the slender trees surrounding him. Hearing no sounds of pursuit, he allowed himself to sink to a sitting position on a toppled tree trunk, his face buried in his hands.

Gradually he became aware of the extreme quiet. This was more than a simple lack of sound, but rather a positive quality of silence, bringing with it all the attributes of that word: stillness, coldness, peace. The boy lifted his head. The snow continued to fall like a shower of downy feathers, motion without sound, each drifting flake inaudible in its flight. The snow drew a noiseless curtain across the world, a curtain that hid all, that enfolded one in pristine concealment. The boy was glad of this. Suddenly there came to his mind the image of a snow-globe, a perfect world in miniature filled with whirling white, enclosed safely forever inside its glass dome.

It was just beginning to grow dark with the pall of late-afternoon winter that

precedes the inevitable descent into night. Everything was cast into shades of white and gray; the clouded sky the color of dusky doves' wings, the formless shadows at the base of the slim trees, the silver birches pale as the gentle, timidly-falling snow, that soft, unsullied cloak of whiteness. The boy watched as the snowflakes landed lightly on his hands, each flake a miracle of intricate design like lacey ice. In less than an instant they dissolved into liquid from the warmth of his skin. He realized he felt no cold, felt nothing but the miraculous sense of stillness brought on by the snow.

"I can't go back there." The boy started guiltily as soon as he spoke the words, not having meant to defile this purity with sound. He instantly realized he need not have worried. The snow muffled his words, surrounded them in soft white cotton, hid them away. At the same time the boy knew that he did not have to return if he did not wish. He had found his way into this snow-globe world, and there was nothing to prevent him from staying and accepting what was offered.

There was a little hollow, a niche formed by the exposed roots of one of the trees. The boy crawled into it, pulling his legs up to his chest and wrapping his arms around them to make himself small. He could smell the dullness of frozen earth and overlaying it the sharp, crisp smell of winter. At first the snow melted into water that trickled down his neck and tickled behind his ears, but in time it began to cover him in a blanket of white velvet. As before the boy was unconscious of the cold. He felt only the soft weight upon him, like being wrapped in a cloud.

With his mind he sought for the hurt place within him. Previously it had been a gaping wound oozing agony and rage instead of blood, poisoning his body with waves of pain. To his astonishment he now found nothing but a faint coolness, a calmness. A tranquility that was white like the snow.

The boy smiled. The snow continued to fall. It spun for the boy the most delicate, finest shroud ever fashioned, a shroud of silent stillness, apotheosis of peace.



Photo by : Ryan Case

Flurries

Adam Fraser

Beautiful day as I looked out the window
I could actually see the wind.
It was as though the clouds that block the sun out
had blocked the sunlight in.

Snow was moving sideways defying gravity
and refusing to touch down.
The wind blew the racing flakes past my window
without the slightest sound.

I left the building, and it engulfed me
as I headed off somewhere.
The slanted flurry raced past me like rush hour
frosting my clothes and hair.

And as I crossed the dusted bridge and jagged river
Something caught my eye.
The feathery clouds drew a perfect diagonal with
an absolutely flawless blue sky.

Rays of sun shot down through the sky's edge
filling the snow-befallen city with gold.
The silhouettes of trees stood
and we watched the beauty unfold.



Photo by : Ryan Case

Romance of Youth

Rob Velella

It was absolutely meaningless. To this day, I'm fully convinced that neither one of us really had any feelings for the other. At least, not in the sense that I know now, as an adult. Even so, it was the first sensual experience of my life.

I was about thirteen years old, in seventh grade. I was in a new world called "middle school." This world felt hundreds of times larger than my old world. Familiar faces were long gone. I was meeting people from across town, which may as well have been the next planet over.

I was maturing now, too. We all were. We thought so, anyway. Looking back, I know that we were really just a bunch of snot-nosed upstart brats. Even so, when you're thirteen you're firmly convinced that you're the king of the world.

Part of this maturation period was romance. Everyone was "going out" with someone else. The term is significant because it gave you the title of being someone's "boyfriend" or "girlfriend," though no "going out" is usually involved. In fact, it usually consisted mostly of giggles around the lunch table and sheepish phone calls every couple days after school.

I was and still am an outgoing kind of guy, though I wouldn't say I'm social. I don't go out of my way to be part of a group. I guess that's why I'm lucky to have so quickly landed a girlfriend when seventh grade started.

Her name was Colleen, and I still think her to be quite beautiful. I haven't seen her in years, but I still picture her as she looked back then. I think we lasted something like four months "going out" together. And it was a healthy relationship. I appreciated her intelligence, her attitude, and her personality. To this day, I'm proud of such a good catch.

Somewhere towards the end of our relationship, or maybe the middle, I came to a huge dilemma. I knew it would be the crossroads of this juvenile relationship and would have an influence on every relationship to come. It was something I struggled with for weeks.

I was invited to a party.

Actually, we both were. And to be specific, it was her best friend's birthday party.

A party. This meant there would be numerous people, snacks, music, dim lighting...and no parents.

Surely, you can see why this posed such a problem for a thirteen-year-old.

It was recognized by my friends that this was an opportunity. Even trying to type the words, it sounds silly and immature, but this was my chance to reach first base.

The possibility was staggering. As a young hunk, it was an achievement I was dying to make. I would gain notoriety, sophistication, and experience.

On the other hand, I had every reason to be nervous. It was sort of like performance anxiety. What if I did it wrong? What if she told potential future girlfriends? I would be ruined!

Like I said, it was a difficult decision to make. But it seemed that I was already behind on my romantic experiences compared to my peers. I had to go to the party. This was more than an opportunity; it was a test.

So, on that fateful Friday night, my mother or maybe it was my father dropped me off outside Colleen's best friend's house. I went in, anxious yet apprehensive.

As I recall the event, I can tell you hardly anything about it. I know there was only about five songs that they played over and over again (a thirteen-year-old's CD collection is hardly DJ material). I know there were ice-pops that were distributed at one point. I know it was nothing like I expected.

And I know I never got up the nerve to kiss Colleen.

We danced to a couple slow songs, but most of the time we sat on the sidelines. Then it happened. She stuck her hand out. I thought for hardly a moment before getting the point. I put my hand in hers.

And we just sat there, holding hands. It felt like hours we just sat there, hardly talking, but hand-in-hand, leaning against each other's shoulders. Sometimes people came by and giggled at us, but it was a solemn experience. It was the most sensual event of my young life.

I don't know if Colleen thought it was as sensual or as exciting as I did. I'm pretty sure she was somewhat upset with me for not doing the expected: to get to "first base." She may even have thought I was sad; I mean, we hardly talked.

But there was more going on that night than the superficial. In my mind, I came to a realization that was far more grown-up than my thirteen-year-old brain. I knew how young I was for the first time. During this time of maturity, as others were forcing themselves to grow up ahead of their biological schedule, I was pushing my brakes to the floor. I didn't want to have this kind of experience. I was too young to handle it, and I was fully aware of it.

I didn't kiss Colleen that night. In fact, my first kiss wasn't until I was 18. I still am very proud of that feat. When I finally did kiss someone, it was with true meaning, with real love – love that a thirteen-year-old version of me just wasn't capable of.

Lifelong Label

Amanda Boughman

“B as in boy, o-u, g-h, m-a-n” I have been saying that line since I learned to talk. Spelling that name came much later. It’s Boughman, “Pronounced like cough as if you have a cold. Boughman.” It is not Boogaman, not Boofman, not Bogman, not Bowman, just Boughman. One should not be offended if I correct them but also not be offended if I do not either. It all depends on my mood. The name has been massacred, ridiculed and even been the springboard for conversation; most of all though the name has been a general annoyance for all of my twenty-two years.

It is not an easy name to pronounce. I have yet to meet anyone that can get it right on the first time – second, third or fourth sometimes for that matter. This is why I have adopted a sort of quasi-diva persona. Most people know me as Amanda. No need for a last name for me, just Amanda--like Cher. It comes in handy. When restaurants ask for a name of the party I always give them Amanda. Co-workers do not know me as anything else. I strive to be Amanda. If I am at work and a vendor must have a full name I have been known to lie. Just call me Amanda Bee, “Bee as in bumble.” A few still manage to mess it up though and I end up with mail addressed to Amanda Bebb. Some people are just beyond help.

Throughout my childhood it was a constant Achilles heel. Cruel children would make up rhyming ditties to taunt me. Thankfully they grew up and the “Barfman” song is no longer the most requested song in the schoolyard. Even teachers mispronounced the name. I rued the first day of school when attendance was taken and there was that uncomfortable catch in the teacher’s voice as he or she tried desperately to grasp at the foreign word on the page. I could predict the cold eyes of

the teacher raking over the scared faces of the students, challenging the offensive student to raise their hand and correct their vocal faux pas. Some teachers were better though; they took one look at the name and did not even try. They simply asked for Amanda to raise her hand to save them from their own tongues.

I plan to marry a Smith, perhaps even a Jones. I would settle for a Kennedy but I draw the line there. When I was a young girl while my friends were dreaming of a handsome rich prince to sweep them off their feet, I was checking nametags and looking through the phone book. I do not care if he is rich or handsome or treats me well--I want his last name. I look forward to the day when I can write Mrs. Amanda Smith/Jones/Kennedy/insert monosyllabic phonetically correct, easy to decipher word here. I do feel bad for my brothers, they are stuck with the name – at least I can marry out of it.

In the most basic sense my name is a label. It is not “cool” or even fun. It is boring and stodgy and makes people trip over their own tongues. Granted my name is not the worst name I have encountered, it just happens to be the dullest. It is difficult enough to illicit questioning conversation but yet not unique enough to be memorable or quirky.

My father had four sisters. Each one married a man with a simple name. My aunt Catherine became an Aux. My cousins try to complain that people mispronounce that name but I think they are placating me. Elizabeth married a Thomas and I think it was humorous that even though she divorced the man, she still kept his name. Can you blame her? My aunt Susan married a Mooney. The only sister that might and I do stress the word might have a problem is Margaret. Margaret married a Lepore pronounced like bore. Her complaint is that people stress the e on the end but I do not believe her. I have never heard it and to me, she still married up the name ladder and not down.

Each member of my family has their own favorite story about our name. My mother's maiden name is simple and, as you can imagine, it takes some adjusting to get used to the new moniker. My father, the ringleader of the Boughman clan, loves when people question the pronunciation. He has been questioned many times, “Are you sure?” “Well, I wouldn't pronounce it that way.” That still amazes me, as if I, or he, have any real say in the matter. He did not start it. He just happened to be born into it like the rest of us. My older brother loved the “Bathroom” songs from the school days as well. Those were fun.

My younger brother is just continually fascinated by our answering machine messages. This can be the one bright spot in a bad day. To listen to telemarketers stammer and sputter out each and every letter in the name until they get so frustrated they hang up or use our first names as if we have been friends for years. My per-

sonal favorite and the gold medal award for mispronunciation goes to the bill collector who called my home and asked for "Armandu Bonguadamon." I hung up on him.

The fun does not stop with mispronunciation either, oh no. Misspellings are another whole carnival of fun. When I transferred to UMass Lowell my name was Amanda Bouchman. For a whole summer of camp I was Amanda Bugman. I went through four years of high school with one teacher calling me Amanda Bowam.

I can poke fun at my name but I do take pride in it. This does not mean I will stop looking out for Mr. Smith though.

Sylvia

Kate Hanson

My finger traces the utterances that frame my cranium,
And yet I come up clenching thin air.
I can only hear this scream.
My body held together by slipstitched letters and
Words in which I sew the vesture,
And now I am so heavily cloaked in sentences
I can barely speak.
I can only hear this scream.

Sylvia, yesterday I picked up your picture
And like an oil painted god your eyes went straight through me.
Such soft features, such a sad, heavy mouth
Not even the great escape of sun from sky could smear those porcelain lines.
And Sylvia, I heard your words.
They were lining your picture and bearing your bones.
All of those sounds, everything that didn't make it to a paper tear,
I heard it all, and it's living in me.

Sometimes I think you and I could be spitting images of images spitting.
And no one but us knows what beast lies between
the breath of our lungs and the blank of a page.
I know what it's like to have an existence framed in paper
and a body built in ink, Sylvia, I know what it's like to drip like a slow, lugubrious
candle.

But I have an angry biting mouth.
I photograph with a crooked smile and

I breathe with the lungs of the desperate.
And sometimes I think I would worship anything
with branches that I could climb.

So Sylvia, my death may not be glorious,
And most everything I'll want to say will die in my throat.
I look at your picture, and I think that girls like us know
words are everything.
If only we could understand what makes our fingers shake.

There's Always More or You're Dead

Greg Ware

"I was at the drugstore, and the total comes to \$8, and I hand her a ten. What does she do?"

"I don't know Ma, what?"

"She gives me back a ten and two singles, as if I had given a twenty." She continues, "When this happens, you act as though nothing is amiss--nothing is awry. Take the money, and put it in your pocket. Walk out to the car, lock the doors, and don't look down until you have left the parking lot."

Ma brings this consumer warfare into the supermarket as she advocates the re-pricing of produce. "Take the sticker off the beefsteak tomatoes, and put it on the vine-ripe tomatoes. They charge too much for those vine-ripes. It's highway robbery, and I won't pay it!"

And God bless the soul that waits on her at the coffee shop.

"Which pot is the freshest?"

"The hazelnut."

"Aahhh...., how fresh?"

"They just made it a few minutes ago."

"Oh. (pause) Is the decaf fresh?"

"Mmmm.... Don't know."

"Okay, could you make a fresh pot of decaf, and then can I get a small half hazelnut, half decaf, please?"

"Sure, lady."

These poor slobs in the food service industry see lots of Ma these days. "I

cooked for twenty years. So what if I like to go out to eat every night? It's not like the Holocaust!"

It's imperative that I phone Ma within 24 hours of arrival when I fly. "Why didn't you call sooner? I thought that the plane was hijacked or it exploded."

When I drive her somewhere, tension mounts in her face. I wait to take a left, and the ritual occurs, the directional light flashing. She orchestrates intensely, "O.K. Good in a minute. Wait until the Buick goes by. Another minute. No. Nope, he was going too fast! Maniac! Alright, after the red pick-up. You got it! Go! Now!" I ease the car out left, taking it slow. With regularity, I notice Ma slamming down her foot on an invisible passenger-side brake, grasping the door handle. It looks involuntary, spastic.

When I was a kid, she ran between six and twelve miles a day, early in the morning. During blustery February and stifling August, she trudged. Now she peddles feverishly on a stationary bicycle. She adjusts the tension to the highest setting, riding for two hours daily. An avid bicyclist, Dad remains baffled that she peddles for that amount of time against such great resistance.

Late afternoon she walks dutifully next to my sister, for miles. Merry is mentally retarded, and lives with my folks. Ever sympathetic, Ma states of Merry's eating disorder, "If she doesn't exercise, she'll turn into a fat-ass!"

Over the years, Ma cultivated an acute understanding of Merry's verbal and sign communications. Merry's utterances tend to be monosyllabic and repetitive. Always anxious, Merry constantly inquires, "Mo?" My mother snaps, "There's always more or you're dead!" Merry motions with her palm, as if pushing on a horn. Ma says, "No, you're not going to school tomorrow, it's supposed to snow. You don't want to crash, do you?" Merry smiles, and replies, "No."

Ma's lingo is popular with friends. She refers to police officers as "fuzz-nicks" and the grocery store, Shop-n-Save, is now "Shop-n-Stink." Her creativity with locutions suggests a strong toilet humor influence. Burps, farts, profanity, and the like always induced laughter in our household, as it surely did in my grandmother's. Ma draws the line with the "f-word." She censors these exclamations. "That's effing ridiculous!"

And when I was nine, I shoved right back. He knocked me down to the dirt. I saw sneering classmates as I lay. Disheartened, I told Ma. She held me saying, "You be yourself. To hell with them."

And when they glare at Merry in supermarkets and airports, Ma is quick to retort, "Gawker!" And, "What are you looking at?"

Best Wishes

Joan Longwell

On a bedroom floor a young girl sits.

Downstairs

her mother moves about, trying to
set up tea, best cups and saucers,
chocolate dipped butter cookies,
trying to show her new lover
she can be all things to all
those she draws into her orbit.

Imagine on an April day, a
city sidewalk, gray, worn,
shedding its skin with
rain's gentle persuasion.

In a cement crack, a tiny
fold of dandelion hands
pokes through.

The girl sighs, waiting for
the stranger to go. She mouths
the words, *What a lie*. But it
isn't a lie, not to her mother,
anyway, who pours tea
and folds her best wishes
under the tiny serving spoons.

Another Night at the Bar

Beth Parker

Smoke filled the empty bar room as the clock struck 2:00 a.m. The jukebox was belting out its last song of the night as the bartender cracked open her first beer placing the bottle opener unconsciously into her back pocket. Spent, she sat at the bar and took a long swill from the cold Budweiser. Looking up she caught her reflection in the mirror. She was wearing a sad look in her big blue eyes and her dark hair hung in a long ponytail down her back. The reflection showed a tired by pretty face questioning why she let herself care, or be sucked up in the dark hole that surrounded her. Swinging her eyes off herself, she surveyed the messy room before her. Sitting at the end of the L shaped bar she could see two stools lying lifeless on the floor. Ashtrays were overflowing and empty beer bottles were thrown carelessly into empty boxes. Another night of clean up, yet a tired melancholy set in as she sighed, thinking of the listlessness of the night. Taking another sip of her beer she closed her eyes and replayed another night at the bar in her head.

Another Friday night! The bartender was wearing short shorts and a little tank top, painting her smile pink as she tucks the lipstick into her pocket. It has been another long hot week for the guys who work outside. Four o'clock in the afternoon brings in tired looking construction workers, welders, landscapers, painters and a car salesman.

The bartender looking at a familiar face asks, "Are you ready for another Coors Light?"

"Sure, why not," repeats the familiar face dryly as he pours his sixth beer into his half-empty glass.

She laughs to herself thinking of their lives and is baffled by the intimacy of their relationships. You learn so much about peoples' lives, but still you think of them as drinks: Tom Budweiser, Dick Scotch-on-the-Rocks, and Harry Bud Light.

The jukebox is quiet now and she does not feel like cleaning yet, so she puts some credits into the machine and plays *Dreams* by Fleetwood Mac. Thing back to her night, she tries to remember which customers paid their tab from the week before. What kind of money do people make in a week that they dish out a hundred bucks to their local watering hole every week? She dismisses the thought trying not to be hypocritical. Again, her mind reverts to the first shift drinkers. They are the mellow bunch who stops in directly from work to catch a buzz and go home to their lonely apartment or disinterested wives. They leave shortly, quenched with the tales of the third shift drinker's mishaps the night before. Don't we all seem to feel a little better about ourselves when someone else is feeling worse? Again she dismisses her cynicism chalking it up to her night with the second and third shift drinkers and cracks another beer.

Second shift mingles in as the first shift disperses. Sometimes the second shift drinkers work a double, searching for a way to relax. Ten bar stools fill with clean-shaven, showered boys ready to start their night. Budweiser for stools number one, two and three; Jack and Coke with a lemon for stool number four. Two Greyhounds are served to numbers five and six while Sam Adams goes to seven and eight. Numbers nine and ten have a Corona and a Bud Light. Chants come from the sidelines for the baseball game. Conversations flare about Pedro being on the D.L. and questions arise on whether or not Wakefield's knuckle ball can shut out the opponent. Of course, the bartender starts the buzz to create some momentum for the evening. On the other side of the bar there are people playing pool. After the bartender makes sure no one is dying of thirst she gets into a conversation with one of the regulars.

"So is it true that girl moved out of your apartment?" asks the bartender.

"Yeah, she left two and a half weeks ago, and I haven't heard from her since."

Shifting positions she leans in close and asks, "Are you sure the baby is yours?"

After some deliberation the young man replies, "No. I left with her and another girl that night. I remember it was the middle of January, because I just started my job. After that I didn't want to see her again and she told me she didn't care because she met some other guy anyway and she's taking up with him."

"Are you going to have a test done before the due date?"

He just shook his head, and was about to say something when stool number six yells, "Hey, I'm finished rolling, time to go for a walk."

Five guys get up from the bar and walk outside for a little distraction. Just then, three blonds come bouncing in with smiles on their faces. One of the girls with long blond hair slides her way down the bar where her boyfriend just temporarily vacated.

The bartender calls out to a tall girl with curly blond hair and a bubbly manner, "Hey honey, what's up for this evening?"

"She laughs and replies, "I don't know, but I would like to do something other than sit here all night."

Just then the shorter, cuter blond squeals, "Let's go to the beach!"

"We can but I'm not taking my junk box. I'll drive if we take your car."

The bartender walks down to the end of the bar to replenish drinks, tired of hearing the same old conversation and makes the girls two Pink Lemonades as they continue their deliberation.

The clock has struck 11:00 p.m. and the crowd starts shifting as the third shift crew arrives.

A big truck pulls in the parking lot and a tall, very slender woman with dark curly hair gets out. From a distance, she may seem attractive. Up close, however her face is filled with the appearance of pockmarks. She looks at the bartender, surveys the crowd for her biker boyfriend and heads directly to the bathroom. Five minutes later she saunters out waiting for her fix to kick in. She starts with a few hellos to a couple of regulars and asks the bartender if she has seen her boyfriend tonight.

"No, he hasn't been in all night."

The girl who is now feeling safe asks, "Do you think I should wait a while for him?"

The bartender, walking away disgusted replies, "Do whatever your little heart desires."

The girl, not even listening, walks out the door and jumps into her big black truck. Slowly the truck backs out and flies away into the night.

"Shut up and just play pool or I'll kick your ass!"

This demand is heard across the bar as everyone quiets down watching with bored interest.

Oh great, no one ever throws a temper tantrum without an audience.

"Screw you," replies the other pool stick, "I want the money that jerk owes me!"

"Well that dude's not here, and I want to play pool without listening to your drunk-ass mouth."

Just then a pool stick flies across the bar room and six guys jump to attention pulling back the heated sticks. The bartender threatens but her demands are lost in

the dance. Two cruisers pull into the parking lot across the street and the boys walk outside to straighten out their differences. There is a general chuckle from the crowd and the night moves on to the lonely hour of last call. The bartender looks at the clock that is set fifteen minutes fast and at 12:45 a.m. calls out for one more drink. Looking around seeing that most of them do not need another drink but placing it their anyway to avoid their hassle.

"I don't want this beer yet," slurs a young guy looking for attention.

Tired of hearing that same line she replies, "So" and walks away.

The bartender awakens from her stupor and looks at the clock, it is getting close to three. She takes her last swallow and gets up to clean the bar. When she finishes, she sits down to count her money. She counts a hundred and sixty dollars. Not bad for the crowd that was in here tonight. Locking the door, she thinks to herself with a wry smile, just another night at the bar.

Homecoming

Rita Blumstein

When I was small and three-feet-tall,
the world was huge and terrifying.
There were no children in that world.
An evil wind had swept the land
and crushed their skulls to dust.

But I was shielded by a thicket
inside a distant forest.
My loyal teddy-bear Danilo
had seen so much that he could see no more.
His two glass eyes were veiled.
Yet he could hear extremely well
and sense the evil wind.
“Get down! Lay still, don’t say another word,”
he whispered in my ear.
“It’s swirling nearby.”

And then I grew to six-feet-tall,
Danilo long since gone, and I forgot
that little kid. My self was busy juggling masks,
a mask for work, a mask for home,
another for my friends.

But lo, in time I shrunk a bit,
the masks began to slip.
And then one day, that little kid
came knocking at my door.

"It's me," she said, "I have come back,"
and she began to wail.

I just stood there by my front door
that still remained ajar.
Inside, the table was set for me,
with candlelight and crystal gleaming.

At last I said, "Come in, my dear.
Your dinner has been waiting."
What else could I have done?



Photo by : Jonathan Martin

Earth Woman, am I

Kathi Chang

who defies the maps,
 and discovers grassy nooks hiding earthly jewels,
who bathes in sparkling waters
 under the full moon's droll smile,
who in solitude, takes cosmic journeys
 to sacred lands within,
who once plucked blossoms from a lethal spine,
 just because...
who finds her Spirit in the pith of her garden,
who delights in her Creator's style, and
who, free of mediocrity, awaits tomorrow's bounty.

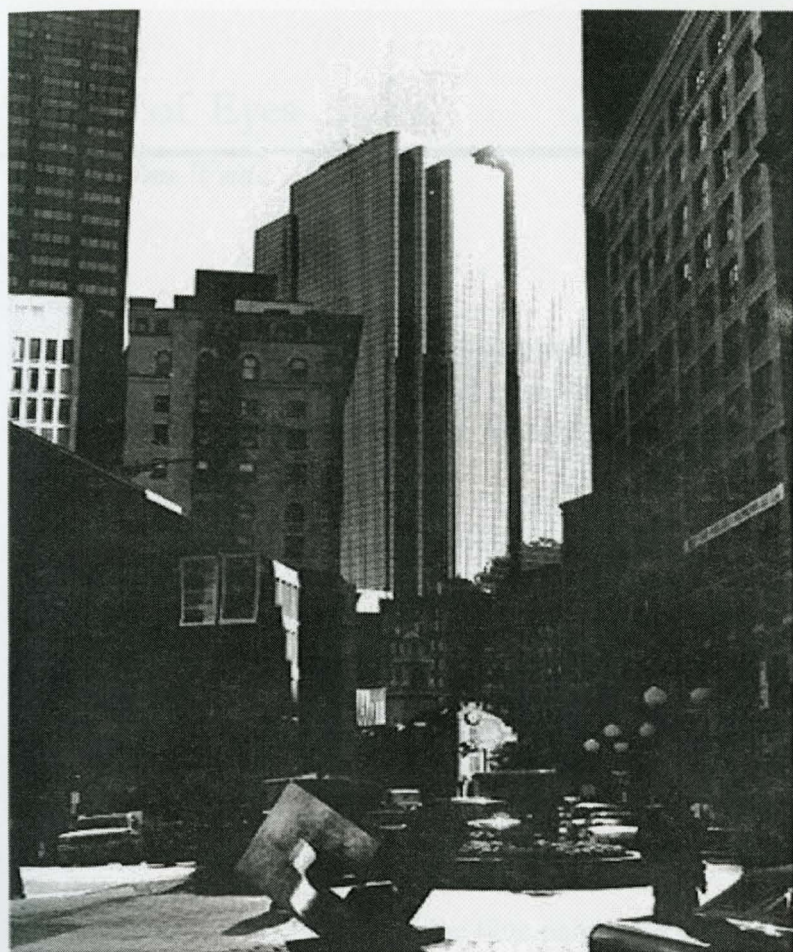


Photo by : Robert Blackie , Jr.

The Offering

If Only My Words

Joan Longwell

If only my words could splash and splatter
against your walls with such a force, of
nature's countenance left unchecked.
White walls stained by my words.

If only my words could rain,
rain down upon you unrestrained,
soaking your clothes, seeping into
your eyes, into your pores, soaking your shoes.

If only my words could illuminate you
on a dark night, when the frost clung to the grass
and fall wind smelled of winter.
November arrives, then fades, words remain.

If only my words.

My words instead drop noiselessly,
lying fallow like leaves at the bottom
of the lake. My words ascend, then fall, lost in
the earth.

A Tale of Eyes

Jaime Weida

I could tell you a tale of eyes.
The steps end after thirteen. You have to find the right book to proceed.
The dying cat had human hands that clutched me as I held it.
The portrait was unfinished and the woman's mouth bled paint.
Blood tastes like copper.
Blood tastes like jelly wine.
When her eyes fell out she replaced them with pearls.
The stone lady watches over the waves, although her eyes are blind.
All hearts taste like sugar-cakes in dreams.
The boy danced and I never learned his name or if his eyes were green.
Buildings speak a language we do not know.
I was trapped in an endless forest of doors.
The woman's hair reached her feet. It had been growing since before she was born.
Every three years we change who we are.
Kittens were never meant to have fins.
Fireflies should not dance.
The sky is really hollow behind the blue paint. No one knows who painted it, or
why.
Everyone has a secret eye no one ever sees.
If everyone was always honest it would always be midnight.
All music is the cry of diseased minds that do not know how to speak.
Life would last longer if your eyes were constantly closed.
Dreams are the only things that should ever be trusted.
All the salt in the Atlantic Ocean is owned by a fat man who wears a bowler hat.
The whole world is only the dream of a small child.
Trees are prevented from moving by invisible chains.
Language is the product of madness.

The Engagement

Jaime Weida

“Anyway, the reason I called is to tell you that Kimberly and I are engaged.”

The kitchen floor was grimy. I had one leg tucked up beneath me for warmth, but the other hung down and my bare foot rested lightly on the dirt ground into the linoleum floor, old filth layered over with new. I noticed a previously unmarked sticky-looking red stain, most likely spoor of one of the many bottles of red wine Cheis and I had drunk during midnights spent sitting at talking at this table.

“Lydia, are you still there?”

I was most definitely not there. The words crackling over thirty miles of phone line were nothing to me. If I did not listen, perhaps it would give Cheis a chance to unsay them. I stared at my dinner, unwanted now, cooling rapidly in front of me. It sent up a weak miasma of stale processed scent. Once I had vowed never to eat Ramen again, but that had been before I moved to the city and tried to subside on a minimum wage bookstore job. The tablecloth beneath the bowl was black plastic printed with orange ghosts. I had bought it on sale in a drugstore in the first week of November. The contrast between its immaculately gleaming surface and the dull grime on the floor was remarkable. I made a mental note to mop the kitchen floor, but knew I would never get around to doing it. I had been doing less and less house-keeping since I had met Cheis.

“Lydia? Hello? Lydia?” Cheis cursed under his breath. “Stupid cordless phones,” he muttered.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “I’m still here, Cheis. I’m just...well, I guess astounded is a good word. I never expected you to get married.”

A hoarse chuckle drifted up from the receiver, more awkward than embarrassed. "I know, but it's not like me to do anything by the rules, Lydie. Anyway, the wedding won't be for a few years. Kim's still in school."

I forced the words out, meaningless convention, little chunks of felt dropping from between my lips. "Congratulations to you both."

"I'd like you to meet her, Lydia."

"Why?" It was out before I could stop it. I bit my lips as if expecting to catch the words still on them, but Cheis was already talking.

"Oh, I dunno...maybe because you're my best friend and she's my fiancée. Probably the two of you are going to be seeing a lot of each other. I mean, she's gonna want to come along when I do stuff now. Don't you want to? She wants to meet you. I told her about you."

I consciously chose not to wonder what Cheis had told her. "Sure, I'm dying to meet her," I lied. "Do you want to come by tonight?"

"Yeah, I've finally got the car fixed. It'll be an hour or so, if that's alright. Kim is still at practice, and the roads are a little slippery after the snow last night."

Kimberly was an athlete, something perky and wholesome like gymnastics or indoor track. Once, drunk on numerous glasses of wine, Cheis and I had laughed about this.

"Think of this," I had said in between snickers, "it could be worse. She could be a *cheerleader*."

Cheis had wiped his streaming eyes. "She might as well be...their stupid little uniforms...and she always puts her hair into this ridiculous ponytail on the exact top of her head, always tied with this long, long pink ribbon like she thinks she's some sort of *prize pig* or something..." He had exploded in fresh laughter, unable to continue.

This had been before he was engaged to Kimberly, when he had told me in crudely blunt terms that her sole appeal as a girlfriend lay in her proficiency as a bed-fellow. Now when Cheis told me she was at practice he said it as if it was a secret between the two of them from which I was excluded.

I had first met Cheis at an outdoor heavy-metal rock concert. This had been two years ago, when I was suffering through the painfully messy end of a three-year relationship. My boyfriend and I had been given a casual invitation to the concert from a mutual acquaintance, but he hated rock music. When I first met him, I thought his predilection for artists like Sting and Moby showed sensitivity, but now I went to the concert to spite him. I cadged a ride in a car full of people I barely knew, my presence legitimized by the fact that I was the only one who had given the driver any money for gas. By the time we got to the arena I had spent a silent hour listening to

the others swap inside jokes and discuss bands whose names I did not even recognize. I was wondering to whom I was going to talk all day, and thinking that perhaps my act of rebellion had been a bad idea.

At the concert we met up with another group of people, all strangers to me. They had spread an old blanket on the ground a short distance from the stage, and sitting on the blanket was a man dressed completely in black smoking a cigarette. Despite the September heat, he wore a leather jacket and heavy boots, and had a battered black fedora pulled low to shade his eyes. Since he was sitting alone without talking to anyone, I sat down next to him. When he turned to look at me I saw that his face was powdered white with black-painted lips, like the deathers I sometimes saw in the coffee-shops downtown. He had coarse black hair beneath his hat that almost reached his broad leather-clad shoulders, and the lines of his face were sharply drawn, almost predatory. At first I thought his deep-set, blazing eyes were black but I later learned they were merely dark brown.

"Um, can I borrow a cigarette?"

The man laughed hoarsely, a chuckle reminiscent of scotch and cigarette smoke. Afterwards I found he was a chain smoker who claimed alcohol and nicotine were the only two drugs that did not destroy his clarity of mind. "Sure you can, as long as you promise not to give it back when you're done." He handed me one with no hesitation and gave me a light from his dented silver Zippo. His voice was deep and graveled with the barest hint of a country drawl. "They're menthols, so I think you'll like them."

I took a hesitant drag on the cigarette. I seldom smoked, but finding myself alone in a group of strangers who knew each other and not me, I needed something to calm my nerves. To my surprise, I did like it, the mint softening the harsh bite of the smoke. "This *is* good. How did you know?"

"Just a feeling." The man grinned amiably at me, revealing yellowed and somewhat crooked teeth. "I gotta ask you something. You often dress that way?"

I looked down at my silver lizard-skin print T-shirt and vinyl pants, assembled without any idea of proper concert attire. "No, not really. I bought this outfit for a party a long time ago. Why? Do I look foolish?"

"Not at all. What I was thinking was, you oughta dress that way more often. If you teased your hair out a bit and put on some black lipstick you'd look real sexy." This was said with a straightforward bluntness that precluded any hint of offense or seduction. A sudden gunfire burst of drumbeats heralded the concert's beginning, and the man leaned closer to me to speak directly into my ear. "You go to many concerts?" I shook my head.

"Great things. I don't care for them much myself, because right now I'm not

into people. I'm like the hermit who meditates for years on the sound the stars make when there's no one else to hear. But something told me I had to come to this one. Maybe I was supposed to meet someone, I don't know. But let me tell you, I think this is the closest any of us will ever come to the Dionysian revels of ancient times. Dionysus was the god of wine and madness. His worshippers would get drunk and dance with no pretensions of civilization masking them. Pure carnality and lust. They called the women the daughters of the frenzy. I'm sure they played music like this, music that would drive you insane with adrenaline rage. Why don'tcha go down into the crowd, get close to the stage. Smell the sweat. Adrenaline smells like copper, did you know that?"

I shook my head. "I've never been to a concert like this, I'll get hurt." He smiled again and laughed a little.

"You'll be fine. If you get too near the mosh pit, whatever you do, don't get knocked down 'cause you'll be trampled. Otherwise don't worry. My name is Charles, by the way, but don't you ever dare call me that 'cause my parents saddled me with it before I had a say in the matter. I like to be called Cheis." His eyes followed me as I stood up.

"When the band's done," he shouted after me, "then you come right back here and tell me all about it."

This was how I met Cheis. Over the next few months we saw each other with steadily increasing frequency. Our visits were seldom planned: in fact, Cheis had his phone shut off for non-payment and I hated to go to the cockroach infested basement apartment where he lived. Instead he would come to the bookstore where I worked and when my shift was over we would spend hours sitting in diners talking over endless cups of coffee. Sometimes Cheis would drive us both out of the city to the ocean or the mountains. I would huddle in the passenger seat of his ancient Chevrolet, wrapped in a blanket because his heater was broken, and we could drive until the sun came up. Other times he would come to my apartment with a bottle of cheap red wine and we would sit at my kitchen table drinking. Always we met at night, when the world was wrapped in shadow, and the ultimate purpose of our meetings was always a never-ending thread of conversation.

Cheis talked ceaselessly, spinning an enchanted web of words, surrounding me with magic, dark faery compulsion. Being with him was like being granted admission to a secret world of which Cheis was the master, and through which he escorted me, the privileged one. In the real world it might matter that Cheis could not hold a job for more than a month before quitting out of boredom, that subsequently he was always broke and I was the one who financed our expeditions, that after sleepless nights spent with him I would be bleary-eyed and useless at work, that

after repeated errors my supervisor had threatened to fire me if my performance did not improve. With Cheis, I was drawn into his world where he was the sage, the prophet, the teacher, and nothing else mattered.

He told me that his real aspiration was to become a magician, not a “New-Age crystal-gazing charlatan,” he said, but a master of the ancient arts of ceremony and alchemy. “The old ones really *understood*—ya know, you wouldn’t believe the stuff they did and they found. Stuff that no one in the brittle, artificial world even has a notion of.” We were sitting together on the hood of his car in an empty parking lot during this conversation, leaning back on the windshield and watching the stars. Cheis made a sweeping gesture with his arm, his cigarette tip tracing a red trail against the sky. “I mean, everything out there is just *worthless*. All the new stuff, that is. What good is it? Ya got people running around like maniacs every day of their lives, producing just to consume and produce again. They’re all *trapped* – it’s so *meaningless*. Not one of them even knows a single thing about truth, all they know is how to be a hamster trapped in society’s wheel. No one even thinks about all that stuff that’s out there and has always been, but now it’s all ignored. Rocks will talk to you if you listen, and they’ll tell you secrets about our world that you’d never guess. Once you’ve listened to the wind, how could you stand to spend your life trapped in some pathetic job? Yet people don’t want to break their chains. Sometimes I think I’m the last person on earth who cares about the old truths.”

I wondered what Cheis saw in me, why he told me these things. I had absorbed enough of his candor to be able to ask. He gave me a frankly appraising stare that made me blush. “Lydie,” he said, using his favorite nickname, “Lydie, ya got *power*. You have the potential to be so much more than a mindless zombie creation of society. Not like most chicks, or maybe they do but they never know it. You’re just starting to know it. I’m helping you with that. It frightens and thrills me at the same time to think what will happen once you wake up all the way.”

Under Cheis’s influence, I cut my hair short like a British 1950’s punk androgyne and dyed it shoe-polish black, started wearing black lipstick and eyeliner, and ended the relationship with my buttoned-down preppy boyfriend, who was most likely relieved to no longer be subjected to such vast changes in my appearance and attitudes. It was about this time that Cheis was evicted from his apartment. One night he appeared on my doorstep with a battered suitcase and a rueful grin. “Can I stay with you, Lydie—just for a while?”

The first few days were great. I knew Cheis too well to expect him to help with the rent, but he brought bags of donuts and cupcakes stolen from the bakery where he worked, and we stayed up nights smoking cigarettes and washing down sweet pastries with swallows of cheap red wine. Our conversations only paused

when one of us had to go to work, and resumed the second we returned. I felt as if we had created our own world together in my apartment, a world infinitely superior to the blandness and sameness of the outside. Then one night I was laying under the blankets on my futon while we talked, and Cheis was sitting on the floor. He was wearing only sweatpants, revealing a chest covered with thick black hair and crossed with a long white scar where, he said, he had been slashed with a knife during a fight. I was supremely honored by Cheis's easy familiarity, a respect that allowed him to sit shirtless in my bedroom, as he would have done with any male friend. He complained of being cold and so, eager to match his level of trust and friendship, I suggested he get under the covers with me.

Cheis was eating a powdered donut and as he climbed into bed I worried him for getting white sugar all over my newly purchased black sheets, and tried to grab the donut away. He tried to cram it into his mouth before I could reach it, and then we were laughing and wrestling like two boys. Suddenly, while I was punching his shoulder, Cheis put his hand on my stomach under my shirt, very low. For such a coarse, callused hand his touch was very gentle, very light. We had both stopped laughing and for a moment there was silence.

Abruptly, Cheis took his hand away and sat up. He took a deep breath and rubbed his face hard with both hands. "I'm sorry," he said slowly, "I can't do this." Before I could speak he had dashed out the front door, shirtless and with bare feet. I lay silently for a while, waiting for him to come back, but at last I fell asleep. When I awoke his suitcase and the bags of donuts were gone and I knew he had moved out. I had not expected to hear from Cheis again, but a week later he appeared at the bookstore at the end of my shift with his battered black fedora and his grin. He was planning to sneak into a graveyard after dark and stay there overnight, and wanted me to come along. He never mentioned the incident between us. Once, about a month later, I diffidently asked him where he was living and he told me he had moved out of the city and was staying with some friends in his suburban hometown. Even when I pressed the issue, he would not explain his reasons for leaving. "It's better this way," was all he would ever say.

I was startled out of my memories by the sound of the doorbell. Cheis and Kimberly were here, and my feet were still bare, my dinner uneaten, and the kitchen floor dirty. Uncaring, I rose to let them in.

Kimberly even worse than I had imagined her, a tiny girl with masses of curly blond hair and an improbably over-stuffed pink angora sweater. I expected her to smell like bubble gum. She had Cheis's arm locked in a proprietary grip as she warbled up at me, "Oh hello, Lycia...Charles has told me so much about you!"

I barely heard her. Cheis's appearance had sent my heart crashing to my feet.

He was hatless with his hair tied neatly back from his face, and his habitual stubble completely shaved away. The leather jacket was gone, to be replaced by a white button-down shirt and a pair of pressed chinos. I stared at the razor-edge crease in astonishment, remembering how once Cheis had worn the same shirt for four consecutive weeks until the band logo had completely flaked off and the neck had ripped down almost to his stomach.

I could not control it. "Cheis, *why*? Why *this*? Everything--everything you said--everything of who you are--*why this*?"

Kimberly looked at me, puzzled and vacuous, not understanding. Yet Cheis's face sagged, and he stared at the floor as the words slowly dragged themselves from his throat, one by one.

"I dunno, Lydia, it's just--just--" he raised his head to look at me and I saw a shameful defiance in his eyes. "It's *something*. Something *real*. I talk, yeah, that's great, real clever. But in the end it's just talk, doesn't mean anything. In the end being a hermit listening to the river or the stars or whatever doesn't mean anything. I was never able to learn all the great secrets I was always talking about. I never learned *anything*. Maybe there's nothing to learn. The only thing I ever learned was how to quit my job, how to live without money, how to pretend all the lousy stuff I did had meaning. Maybe only what all those people want, the ones I talked about and the ones I despised, the thing that drives them, is just wanting something real they can hold on to. Not just words or ideas that don't come to anything. *Something real*. I didn't understand. Maybe now I do."

Tears welled in my eyes. "You lied," I said flatly. "Everything you told me, everything you swore by never meant anything to you. You got frightened of the failure of your own convictions and pulled out, after first dragging me down with you. I never meant anything to you."

I waited. When I saw Cheis was not going to answer me I turned my back on him and sat down again. I did not hear them leave.



Photo by : Matthew Briggs

The Offering

Black Humor

John Dube

Just before Christmas, near the end of my second year policing, three brazen daylight burglaries were perpetrated. In a rural bedroom community this type of Yuletide incident is as commonplace as plastic Santas, mistletoe, and cars sporting the carcasses of slain fir trees tied down to their roofs. But they didn't stop. After the holidays, Chief was coming under fire from the town selectman, so he decided to take action.

I was the only member of the department who had any post-secondary education: this, coupled with the fact that I could write legible reports, made me the object of Chief's political salvation. He sent me to the New Hampshire Police Academy's Crime Scene Analysis School for New Detectives. The goal, as he explained to the selectman, was not to certify me as a detective per se, but for me to bring the "principles of crime scene analysis" back to the department.

At the class we learned how to interpret blood spatter patterns. Vast sheets of white paper were laid upon the gymnasium floor of the Academy. Each student took turns filling eyedroppers with blood from a glass jar that was full of the stuff, freshly drawn from a thoroughbred racing horse one of the instructors was part owner of. The instructors had us stand, walk, and run past the trail of paper, squirting the contents of our eyedroppers onto it until it became an expansive network of red streams and droplets.

One of our instructors, Benjamin Hartwell, was a veteran detective of the Dover Police Department. He had trained with the UK's Scotland Yard, the law

enforcement agency that, as he said, “invented blood spatter interpretation.” He strutted back and forth along the length of the bloodied paper, slid his gold police shield along the belt it was clipped to and onto his hip, then he squatted down. His leather shoes squeaked against the gym floor as he motioned for us to huddle around him with his arm.

“There are three types of blood spatter,” he said. “High velocity, low velocity, and cast off. Cast off blood spatter is most often encountered in stabbing or bludgeoning cases. What happens is, as the perpetrator draws back his or her arm to deliver another blow to the victim, some of the residual blood left on the weapon is cast off. It leaves a distinct pattern that is similar to the way an abstract painter might fling paint onto a canvas. Low velocity impact spatter has little force acting on it besides gravity. If the bleeding subject is running, the droplets fall in a teardrop shape, the tails pointing away from the direction the subject is moving. High velocity impact spatter occurs as the result of an explosion or gunshot wound. It leaves a pattern that looks like a fine red mist. You may encounter one or any combination of these on scene. OK. Any questions? Alright let’s get this paper cleared, it’s almost coffee time.”

Most of the blood had dried on the paper, leaving dark stains. As we rolled up the sheets, Hartwell’s pager went off. He had a 10-54S, a suicide; his dispatcher thought he should know. He glanced up from the pager’s screen, looked us over and smiled. He asked another instructor if he could use the phone in his office. The instructor told him to help himself.

After several minutes Hartwell reappeared and told us that he thought this suicide would be an excellent opportunity for us to examine blood spatter patterns at an actual working scene.

“It’s a cut and dry case,” he said. “Uniforms have secured the scene so it shouldn’t turn into a cluster fuck.”

We drove to Dover.

When we arrived on scene a uniformed officer approached Hartwell. He had a graying moustache and three royal blue chevrons sewn onto the sleeves of his dark blue jacket.

“What’s the score sarge?” Hartwell asked.

“We got a nineteen-year-old male in the car with his head blown off. According to the girlfriend’s statement they got into a fight last night. He gets verbal and starts throwing furniture around, then he takes off. She gets scared, calls us, and files an emergency domestic violence order--Higgins took the call, he’s on midnights all week I think. Anyway, Higgins explains to the girlfriend that if the guy makes con-

tact with her in the next twenty-four hours, he gets arrested for violating the order. Higgins has dispatch put out a BOLO for the boyfriend's El Dorado and asks the girl if she has anyone she can spend the night with. Obviously she didn't. Anyway, the boyfriend turns up this morning, approaching the front door of the trailer on foot, screaming the girlfriend's name, and proclaiming to the high hills his never-ending love for her. She wants to let him in, but she knows that if she does he gets pinched, from what Higgins had told her. After a while the boyfriend goes back to his car, screams her name one last time, and inflicts a single gunshot wound to his right temple using a home made zip gun."

Detective Hartwell nodded his head at the sergeant. "These officers are from my class, I'm going to have them look over the vehicle for traces of blood spatter."

The sergeant looked at us and grinned. "Long arm of coincidences," he said. "You guys got lucky cause there's a lot of blood in that car."

The vehicle was parked approximately thirty feet from the trailer on the paved driveway. A figure behind the haze of the windshield was just barely discernable, sitting upright behind the wheel. Hartwell led the way up the driveway towards the vehicle with his students in tow.

The scene was many hours old but it still stunk. The driver's side door's window was shattered. The smell of blood, cigarette smoke, and stale potato chips leaked from the window and trickled down the backs of our throats. The victims had used a 20-gauge bird shot load, the spent plastic casing lay on the seat beside his body. The victim's weapon was so crudely constructed it blew to pieces when it discharged. The barrel of the iron pipe was split open on the end; it rested on the floor of the car. The weak load did not obliterate his head, but it lifted a portion of his scalp as though it had been attached by a hinge. The bulk of the victim's brain sat in his lap, after having bounced off the ceiling of the car. The detective pointed out examples of high velocity impact spatter on the beige interior of the vehicle. It looked as if someone had sneezed with a bloody nose.

Low velocity impact spatter ran down the cream colored surface of the of the El Dorado's driver's side door. Two forks had joined together forming a wide rivulet near the door handle. The blood had made its way down the door and dripped onto the pavement where it was absorbed. As I made an illustration of it in my diagram workbook, I heard Hartwell shout, "FUCK! I just stepped in dog shit." Scraping it off his black leather shoe with a pen, he paused briefly, shook his head and smiled. He looked relieved. "Brains," he said, and we all laughed.



Photo by : John Belanger

Roller Coaster

Tarnya Rivera

Have you ever felt the
Turns and twines
Ups and downs
Of the
Roller Coaster
Ever felt the
Mountains of pleasure
And
The
Valleys of disappointment
Ever been on a ride that
Never ends till you say
That enough
Ever had the
Lover that loves
In and out
Wants you forever now
But
Two seconds later
Wants out
Ever been
Teased with something you love
And
Tormented that you might never have it
Ever known what you have
Or
What you lost

Or
What's the same
Ever felt
The thrills and downfalls
The pleasures and disappointments
Of
The
Roller Coaster

Model Heroine

Mary Beth LaRivee

My cousin Zoe died today. Well, yesterday, now that I think of it. She was a middle-of-the-line working model in New York City. That's more elite than you think, since most "models" are actually strippers, secretaries or waitresses who clog the lobbies at modeling agencies in their spare time. Still, it wasn't the greatest job in the world. Not the glamorfest it's made out to be. Her only real claim to fame is the 1997 Burberry catalogue. A real monument for the ages, huh? Worth the years and years of misery and wasted time.... When they told me she was sick they told me it was skin cancer, but I think it was AIDS. She did those sorts of drugs, for a while. Everyone except my relatives could see the marks on her arms, notice that bits of jewelry would go missing from their houses only when Zoe visited. Towards the end, even they noticed the gaunt look and shaky, tense attitude.

My parents sent me an e-mail to tell me she died because I wasn't in my dorm all night, and my roommate can't take messages for love or money. I didn't get the e-mail until after I got a call from my grandmother telling me Zoe was dead.

She'd called up around seven in the morning. I'd just arrived back in my dorm room, fresh from a dismal party. I was moaning to my half asleep roommate that the black haired, golden skinned, muscle toned Asian God I'd been lusting after since, well, last month, had a girlfriend who he was already cheating on with someone else. Then the phone rang, and it was my grandmother. I immediately realized something was wrong because her voice was... bizarre sounding. She sounded muted, she almost gurgled when she had to get the first words of the conversation out: "wear something proper to the wake, Heather."

"Who died?" I said, "Sorry. I've been at a party, and my roommate can't take messages."

Silence on the other end of the line. She didn't automatically spring into one of her lectures on properly communicating with one's family, she didn't even ask me why I was coming in from a party at seven in the morning. She just cleared her throat and said, "Zoey." Then she started to cry. I muttered something along the lines of "hebghwa" into the phone, muttered that I had to get to class, and hung up.

I realized she had AIDS, not skin cancer, right when they told me she was sick. I remember the event way too vividly, I was home for the weekend, eating Sunday dinner. It was one of those rainy New England Indian Summer days that makes everything feel overwarm and slightly putrid. Cooking dinner had made the house too hot, so we ate dinner with all the windows open, quietly letting the wind busily blast rain into the house and onto the food. We all sat down to the soggy food, picking at the pieces and pulling sweaters on, then off again. The air from the windows wouldn't mix with the air in the oven, so the house was alternately hot and cold as air swirled about. It reminded me of fever sweats. Mom was all upset because she hadn't timed the green beans almonidine properly, so there was a seven-minute lag between the rest of the food and the green beans. Finally, mom came in triumphantly bearing a stew-pot with the green beans, which she brandished over my plate. As she tilted it to dump the green beans out she said, "Your cousin Zoe's in the hospital down in New York. She had weird blotches on her skin, they think it might be cancer." In that moment I had a burst of insight. *Poof: the correct translation of this sentence is "Zoe has AIDS."* Reality kinda bulged, all the colors in my field of vision became more intense, then snapped back into their proper hues for absolutely no reason whatsoever. Everyone stared at me since I was the last to know. I was invaded by some Dark Thing, my hands curled up and I found myself shouting, "what are you looking at? How long did you know this, and why didn't you tell me *right away*?" (The *right away* came out as a sci-fi movie style snarl. For a microsecond I was suprised that I could make a noise like that.) I sat in my seat and glared at my mother.

My mother took a deep breath, displayed a far too lovey smile, and started talking. "I didn't want to bother you during midterms, sweetie." She shivered. "Your knowing wouldn't have cured her cancer, Besides, it wasn't like you were best of friends. She was so into that model thing, though she never seemed very... oh damn!" A gust of wind had come up while she was trying to find the right word to end the sentence, and blew the napkins into the mashed potatoes. As she and Dad tried to pick soggy napkin bits from the mash, I cooled down and started to eat my green beans. Why press the issue? I wouldn't really hear the right answer, anyway.

I chewed and thought.
Zoe when we were little....

Swimming in my Aunt Cathy's pool. Trippy. Light and color reflected in the oddest patterns. Zoe swam before me, hyper in her stylish black one piece, thrilled that she could stay under and hold her breath longer than I could. I didn't want a contest, I just wanted to float, do cartwheels, practice the breaststroke. She spun around and caught my wrist, made a little waving motion for me to slow down, then flashed me breasts. (Such as they were, she was only nine.) I was shocked, just like she'd wanted me to be. We surfaced she treaded water and laughed at me. I was afraid the nuns would get her right that second, but as a few more seconds passed and there was no nun onslaught I began to relax. I was a paranoid product of Catholic school — I always thought the nuns were watching me. Sometimes, I still get that strange feeling that someone's watching me live my life — and disapproving mightily when I'm bad. Zoe ducked under water again, grabbed my ankles before I could work out why she'd gone back under, and ducked me. I was trying to get a foot loose so I could use my leg to push her away from me when Aunt Cathy called us to dinner. We declared a truce while eating pickles and cold sauerkraut. After dinner I went home and didn't see her again for months afterwards, when she started modeling for the Pre Teen Department at Jordan Marsh — and then I only saw her on a catalogue cover.

I was still chewing my green beans when Mom despaired of getting the napkins out of potatoes. She went into the kitchen to throw the whole plate away, came back with two mugs and handed me one. It turned out to contain stewed tea with only a little milk in — my favorite kind of tea. “She ran a fever and had this weird stuff on her skin. Leena, the thin roommate with pretty, long, red hair — remember the Labor Day Party at Wallace Sands and the Isles of Shoals Boat Tour? — took her to the hospital.” Leena was Zoe's lover, though no one in the family acknowledged this. Mom continued, “The doctors did tests for hours, and they finally came out and said it was... cancer.”

(AIDS, Mom, just admit it. It's 1998.)

She ran out of words. We sat in silence until I said I should get going back to Lowell. I was on 495 before I started thinking about it again.

A car cut me off on the highway and I honked loudly. For some reason this brought my thoughts back to AIDS. I tried to think about the paper on *The Rise of China*, which I had to write for economics when I got back to my dorm, but it was a no go. I didn't like my cousin very much, but the thought of her alone in a big-city hospital room, encrusted with lesions, zonked out on meds, was too awful to be

ignored. It was so... melodramatic, and despite the exotic sounding career, lesbianism, and heroin addiction, I'd never expected Zoe to be a melodramatic sort of person. When you were in a room with her she was just kind of there. She could be outrageous, but always in an expected sort of way. She never came out of the closet, never admitted her drug problems — in my family if you don't wave your freak flag high, everyone will just pretend the alternative life-style, college attendance, or the drug problem, doesn't exist. No one will support you, or kick you in the bum when you need it.

The family was always disappointed that I went to college instead of to New York with Zoe. "It will be so glamorous," they said. "She models sweaters for a mail order catalogue," I said, but they didn't listen.

They had forgotten, or didn't want to think about, the sheer unstimulating drudgery of the job. The hours and hours of sitting and staring at the camera while strangers painted or rearranged an assortment of your body's parts. The Scavuello and Avedon wannabes chanting, "Make love to the camera!" or "That's it, you're sexy, you're sexy!" My relatives didn't see the waste, or the sheer hatefulness of the job, they just saw the money. Until Zoe got sick, my aunts and grandmothers used to click their tongues at me when they saw me wearing my college T-shirt. To them, I was a student, a word synonymous with slacker, sucking money out of the family accounts instead of putting it in. Zoe was an adult living in New York City and making enough money to buy her mommy a mink collared coat for Christmas.

I guess you could say I'm a resentful bitch, but I'd like to think there was more to it than that. Their eagerness to throw another daughter of the clan to Ford's and Casablanca's sharks was downright creepy, especially later — when it became obvious that Zoe was on drugs and very unhappy.

For two years before she died, at all the family parties, Zoe would curl up on the corner of her mother's couch, slowly sipping a beer and playing with the pull tab while relatives talked at her, making up her job.

"That Christmas party Elite gave must have been wild."

"Actually, I didn't..." (*poing poing poing* went the pull tab)

"Did Brad Pitt come? What about Donatella Versace?"

"I don't know... I wasn't there."

"You must have been stunning, I'll bet you made all sorts of important contacts. Have you gotten to date any great guys? C'mon, you can tell me."

At this point she'd usually roll her eyes, grab her purse, and head for the bathroom. She'd come out a bit later with a smirk on her face, and then start making up answers during those sorts of conversations.

"Do you go to any great nightclubs?"

"Oh yeah, Studio 54 is the best, the scene there is so wild."

"Really? I thought it went out in the Eighties."

"That's only what the mass media says, yeah, that's how we keep it so exclusive."

Later I'd find her sitting in the screened in porch, drinking more and staring at her fingernails. She'd offer me a beer and we'd sit down and talk. Well... say things.

"Don't listen to me at all."

"Gotta get back to school."

"Should go into acting."

"I have to finish my paper on Drama and Catharsis."

"Then they'd really take me seriously."

"Hate my chem prof. Hate him!"

"No one appreciates that I do any work at all."

"They all think my life is fun and games."

"Nothing I do or say has the slightest ability to change their opinion."

"I think I'm in love with my makeup artist."

"Really?"

"Her name's Leena."

"Ah. I think I'll go to University of Puget Sound to get my Masters."

"She has honey blonde hair. And a cute ass."

"Although, I don't really like academics. Actually, I don't really like college. I think I just went there because I couldn't think of anything else to do."

"Maybe she'll work out better than Sandi did."

"You understand me, Zoe, aren't they the most self absorbed people?"

"Yeah...."

Then we'd stagger back to the party.

My mom just called to say the funeral's going to be held at St. Patrick's Church, in Lawrence, on Saturday. Then Zoe's going to be buried at Mary Immaculate Cemetary in Methuen. I can't even begin to tell you what that'll be like. I don't really want to think about it.

Must concentrate on Chinese economics. Socialist Stock Market... Deng Xiaoping... 1989...

1989. Friday night. Sometime in... March. My mom is helping Aunt Cathy get ready for a date, Zoe and I are watching The Peanut Butter Solution on Aunt Cathy's couch while browsing through Auntie C's Cosmos and Vogues. The kid in the movie looses his hair. Zoe shoves a magazine with a picture of Cindy Crawford at me

demanding, "isn't she pretty?" I consider Cindy C very carefully, as if Zoe has just asked me a crucial question. "Boring." I conclude. "She looks just like what's-her-name in your mom's really old Vogues. Actually, she looks just like a lot of models. I'd rather be Jennine from Ghostbusters. She's a secretary, and sometimes, she kills ghosts. That's much more interesting than just getting your picture taken all the time."

Zoe snorts and gives me a superior look. She sneaks a glance in the direction of her mother's room, then takes the remote and switches the movie off, so we can get a few glances of the forbidden MTV. The channel is flipped and she leans forward to get a better look at Paula Abdul.

The Cosmo with Cindy Crawford on it falls to the floor.

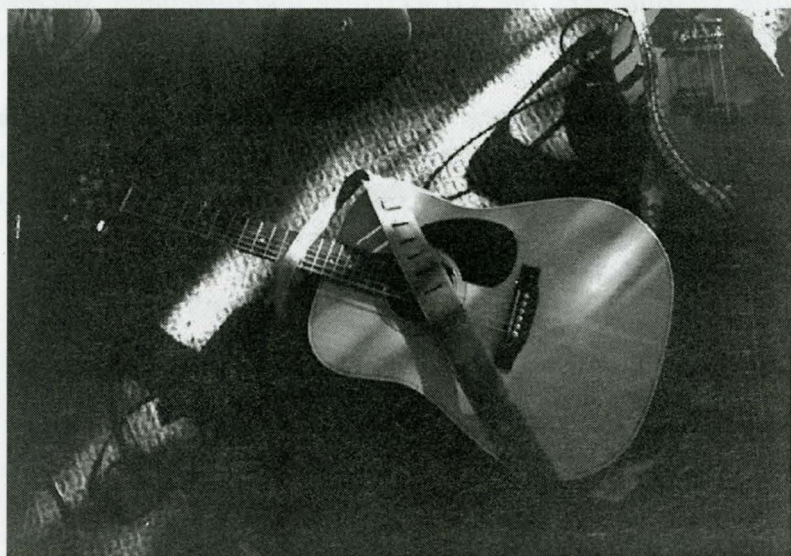


Photo by : Jonathan Martin

Goosesong

Melissa Juchniewicz

November stumbles, slips and shuffles through the leaves
Of russet, ochre, of morocco, and maroon.
A balmy, bare-branch morning. Overhead
A creak of wing, a flap, a croak of goose's tune.

Voices rising in agreement, joining ranks,
Now readying to lift, positioned right,
A symphony of grand cacophony!
November graced by the perfection of their flight.

Dream

Jennifer Gentile

He haunts the night and dreams
Creating a waking hell, visions
Filling awareness as they did dreams.
His touch and breath linger on skin,
Hot silk leaving a lasting wake,
Reminder of his presence.
His eyes call as the sweet scents,
Cinnamon and chocolate, beckon
Warmth in late winter.
And he draws closer whispering.
His velvet voice spinning a web of intoxication
Soothing the panic and fear he feels radiating.
He draws near, pulling closer into an embrace
His arms enfold.
His lips caress, his breath, warm and sweet
Against skin, before he dips and gives
Oblivion

modernism

Matt Briggs

it is so

kewl

to be so

phat

Teresa In and Out

Jennifer Allyson Bassett

These were the times Teresa had been trying to avoid her entire adult life. These moments of lucidity make her flinch. Drowning them out seemed like the easiest way. She had seen almost everyone do the same thing before her. It had even killed her father when she was still young. Now it was Teresa living in this distorted reality. She wasn't completely alone in it, however. Her sister and brother had also chosen to turn to a bottle of something better than what life had given her. What good was living with these memories, when you can live in oblivion?

But, she was alone and had been for years. The others had left her, through no fault of their own. Each had similar problems to deal with. They had their own families that they were struggling to keep together. She had never found fault in their decisions to battle the demons by themselves. She had been doing that her entire life.

Now she could hear the shouts coming from the living room. Her mom and dad were arguing yet again. Dad hadn't come home from work and Teresa knew that he had stopped by the bar to throw back a few with his buddies. Mom had done her drinking on the living room sofa. She would be on her eighth or ninth beer by now. Dad had stumbled into the house, so he was probably well ahead of her. In an otherwise noiseless evening, the explosion of the light bulb against the floor was enough to wake her little brother and sister. They crawled into the bed and snuggled up to her and they waited together for the shouts to turn to snores. This time it was different though. The sounds downstairs weren't just the bumping and slamming of furniture. This was something new. She wasn't sure but it sort of sounded like they had

moved on to hurting each other physically. Her suspicions were confirmed when mom began to wail in pain. Why hadn't she been asleep when he got home? It was too late now and no one dared to go down. Then she heard her mom moan out the words: "Get Out!" Dad slowly climbed the stairs, rustled around in the bedroom for a while then stumbled back down. The door slammed and she knew they would never see him again. She pulled the two little ones closer to her.

Someone touched her arm and she slapped it away. Everything around her was unfamiliar in this haze. Wait. This voice was familiar. Linda stood next to the bed and called for the nurse. Teresa looked at her with disdain. What right did her daughter have to be in her house? She wouldn't bring over a six-pack with her like she used to. Now that she had her own family all she did was nag. Yet this didn't feel like home. It smelled different, cleaner, sterile even. The lights were turned on here and they were so bright. Then a woman in a white uniform came up to her and suddenly everything was clear. That little brat had put her in a hospital. Teresa began to screech. Oooh! She was going to get out of here. Her brother had been in a place like this before. She had tried to sneak in a little vodka in a flask. One of the orderlies had taken it away. Not her, they were not going to stop her from doing anything she wanted. Who do they think they are? Suddenly, she started to feel weak. She would just take a little nap and would deal with them when she woke up.

The littlest brother was tugging on her arm. It was dinnertime and no one was there to make dinner. Since dad left mom started going off in the evenings. Sometimes she wouldn't come home at all. Other times she would come with some strange man reeking of liquor. Some of them would try to come into the little ones rooms at night if mom passed out. Teresa's room had a lock on it so she mostly kept them in there with her. There must be something in the cupboards to make for the kids. They always were so hungry. Once again mom had forgotten to do the shopping. She sent the boy to go look for loose change in the sofa. Teresa went to her room to find something to pick the lock on her mother's door. Under the mattress she found a few dollars. She took two. Downstairs, the boy had found thirty cents. That would buy them a jar of peanut butter and some bread down on the corner. It was enough to last them for a couple of days.

Teresa just had to get out of there, but the only way she could think of was to get them to believe that she was through with drinking. This was going to take a while. Linda was coming everyday now. If she had been any stronger she would have gotten up and thrown her out herself. For now she would have to settle for

complaining to the nurse.

It was time for her to get ready for bed. She was strong enough to get to the bathroom if someone was with her and the nurse always was. *Teresa pulled back the curling blond strands of hair from her face and twisted them into a bun. She let a few hang over her temples because her boyfriend had once told her he liked it when she wore her hair that way. Behind her, her little sister watched admiringly. Teresa wondered if she would help her get ready for her own prom one day. She reached for the lipstick. She knew the girl liked to wear it when she was allowed.* But there was no make-up on the sink. When she looked up it wasn't her little sister but that horrible nurse lurking behind her. In the mirror she also saw an old woman. She had wrinkles and bags under her eyes. Her stringy gray hair hung limply over her shoulders and she looked like she hadn't eaten in years. Teresa sobbed when she realized that reflection she was seeing was her own.

Two children held her hands. *Teresa raced with them towards the edge of the water. When the waves came they raced back up the beach before their feet could get wet. The two little ones giggled hysterically and she joined them in the sand. They built a castle for a while before the girl wanted to race again. She grabbed their hands.* These hands weren't filled with energy but sadness. Their eyes were the same as the girl's but the rest of their faces were different. She looked up at the youngest sister just as a tear streamed down her cheek.

Instead of getting better, Teresa was only getting worse. She had overheard the doctor telling Linda that she had pneumonia. It looked as though it was going to be a while before she was going to get that drink. In the next room she heard a baby wail. *The sound moved closer and the nurse placed the smallest human being she could ever remember seeing in her arms. It had a scrunched up little face that was bright red from crying. It grabbed Theresa's finger and settled down. She held the infant close to her body. The doctor asked for a name and she told him* Linda moved over the bed and kissed Theresa on the forehead. She said that she would be back the next day for visiting hours. She shut off the light as she left the room.

Teresa's breathing was becoming more difficult. Two days ago they hooked her up on a machine to help her. She couldn't even understand Linda when she had tried to tell her mother what was going on. Teresa looked up into her daughter's eyes. She wanted to say something, but did not have the breath or strength to speak. A few people were coming into the room now—people she had known for their entire lives that she had somehow forgotten how to love all these years. Her breathing became very shallow as she began to fight for air. *The priest stood in front of her and spoke to the members of the church. Kneeling next to her was the man who was about to become her husband. He smiled at her and she flashed a glowing smile back at him.*

They stood. The priest began to administer their vows. These weren't the rights of marriage she was hearing but the last she would ever hear. No matter how hard she pushed, she could feel the little life that was left in her body slipping away.

The Stone Phone

Ben Hanson

I was at the foot of the path, marveling at the landscape I had sought out. Below me, the rushing headwaters of 6th and Main converged at a massive sewer grate that emptied into the bowels of the city. From above, soft sunlight filtered down through the industrial smog. It was cool to the skin and the shadows it produced knew little about shape or form. As I stood there, a mixture of unnatural smells seemed to surround me and intoxicate my focus. With trains blaring, machines chattering, and careless cars zooming by, I knew I was exploring a harsh and detached territory. For nausea's sake, I had almost lost my purpose in making this trek.

I calmly started up the path. A few moments prior, the coarse taxi driver reluctantly informed me of its whereabouts, claiming it was absurd to be concerned with the past, the now was vastly more important. After anxiously scaling a fence and repositioning a few abandoned trash containers, I stumbled upon the monument. Unlabeled, unmarked, and unprotected, it lay ten feet in front of me upon the damp alley pavement.

Curious, I crawled around on my hands and padded knees, attempting to capture it in different lights. At first, it lay still and silent just beyond the reach of a blinking traffic light. The overcast skies did not lend much of a hand either. I'll admit I yearned for more. So, I took action. Flashlight in hand, I circled it with deliberation.

The soft light from my flashlight moved gradually over the thin antenna and then over the stone casing. As soon as the light struck the keypad, it started to awaken. With the light and shadow just right, it appeared as if the stationary buttons on

the pad were moving up and down. Approximately 57,287 days ago, the cellular phone was created. It was a work of art, man's successful attempt to combine the archaic telephone with a portable plastic coating and an ingenious wireless technology. There were few left of its tired generation. Even though, this stone carving was a vivid reminder.

For a moment, I thought of the people who might have used such a rudimentary instrument. And then, I pondered their struggle. I imagined what it must have been like when the cell phone went off unexpectedly in a quiet place, like a classroom full of focused students or a theater full of movie watchers on edge. I could sense the fiery looks and horrible stares. I also imagined what it was like before the cell phone. I envisioned the tranquility of a bus terminal and the serenity of a two-story shopping mall. Without the cell phone, the world had to have been steeped in silence and erred communication.

But alas, I stepped back away from the artifact. I took one last kneel in reverence, praying that somehow the stone phone would sit upon this pavement unharmed at least till the next technological revolution. Then, I turned my back and signaled for another taxi. I had no problem leaving one of history's imperfections behind. Someday, another will stumble upon the stone phone. And just maybe the sun will be shining.

Unsaid

Robert Blackie

Standing alone, looking back from afar,
I can not help but ponder where you are,
Two paths long since seperated,
Like my words, are lost, never to be stated.

When did it end, where did I go wrong?
I never knew the silence would last for so very long,
Anything I would do to only reclaim the past,
The days I thought our friendship would forever last.

Day by day, time slowly slips by,
When will I face the truth I have so long defied?
I've only said a hundred "tomorrows" - so many lies,
First I must forgive - to realize the blame is mine.

So through these years we just sit, and wait,
All the problems of the world to contemplate,
Always hoping for change, some unique twist of fate,
Uncertainty now has become the subject of my hate.

Afraid to think what tomorrow may bring,
Where has this life gone, where now should I be?
Though the future seems so very far,
Looking up I ask, "Where am I among the stars?"

To look at someone so young yet so old,
Whatever happened to the face I used to know?

Tears that have fallen down off your cheeks,
Only find the ground that you have longed to seek.

Though I've long lost the will to cry,
It makes each day no easier to survive,
If I could just release my fears, my foolish pride,
Maybe my heart I would no longer have to hide.

Soon I will wake up to another day,
Realizing that there must be some other way,
Why must I wait for this lonely life to end,
Just so I may see you once again.

Mr. Subtext Malaspell Sends a “Mega-scene” to his “Sunny” at College (*Sic*)

Joseph Zaitchik

Dear Sunny,

So I went to the A-pox-you-carry and I asked the firm-assist, “Do you sell mega-scenes?”

“Yessir, yessir, yessir, we curry mega-scenes. *Sports Ill-is-treated?*” he sick-jested.

“No, no! I want a mega-scene culled—”

“Oh, oh,” he wisp-heard, “I gas your reek-quest. You want *Playboy*, the one with the sin-to-fold.”

“No!” I rip-lied, “I don’t buy a-dolts-only mega-seens!”

“Oh,” sighs he, “I’m so surly! I pull-a-jazz! Maybe you want the cur-rent *Dogs Gazette* or purr-haps *Cats Magazine* or—”

He hurt me deep with his sore-chasm. “Oy, ass,” I mutt-turd, “a dog muck-a-scene. Why, you little drug-gassed—”

“Oh,” size he, interrupting, “You want *Kiss-my-Paul-a-ton?* It has an ex-citing sack-survey. Or *Gnash-you-nil Review?*”

“Oy, ass,” I reap-lyed, hot under the color. “You must be a can-serve-a-thief! You sap-scribe to *Ridder’s Dye-gist*. You read how the tell-avenge-holiest fund God!”

“You read *Gin-til-man’s Quart-early?*” in-salts he.

“Of curse, of coarse! And your wife reads *Madam-was-sell!*” re-tarts I.

“Stop!” shoots he.

"I gas your reek-quest. You want *Anti-yuck Re-few*."

"No!"

"*Horsemen's News?*"

"Neigh!"

"*Boy Scout—*"

"Knot!"

"*Barber's Monthly?*"

"Nicks!"

"*American Scholar?*"

"Know!"

"*Wildlife Conservation?*"

"Gnu!"

"*Journal of Entomology?*"

"Gnat!"

"*Amazing Stories?*"

"No way!"

"*Star-telling Dick-tick-tiff? Seen-yore Sit-is-hands?—with a disc-cant Florida winter travail off-fur?*"

"No! No! No! No! I want *Mad Mega-scene*! For my sunny! My sunny is in bad (*sic*) with a cold. I want to send him a *Mad Mega-scene*! It will give my sunny buoy a lift. He is so pale. I want to send him a hue-more mega-scene. I axe you one more time! Do you—"

"Oh, pleas," he bigged, pull-lightly, "For-grieve me, I'm so surly! Yule just go past Christmas cards and turn write after Stationery, and there's the mega-scene wrack, and on the muddle self just blow *Sailing World*—"

"Oy, ass! I fond it! *Mad Mega-scene*! I jump for joy! It was right next to *Hopper's Bizarre*!"

"Oh, giddy for you!"

"Fink you very much," sighs I, and I faze him one dolor, and I'm goon.

So here it ease, sunny buoy! Relax with your *Mad Mega-scene*! Just don't rid it too fast. Inch-joy it!

Dad

(Mega-scene ink-closed)

THE END



Photo by : Ryan Case

To My Christian Friends

Yakov Zilberberg

I make no cross at crucifixion,
I do not kneel inside a pew—
Not out of spite, nor by affliction:
I'm not a Christian. I'm a Jew!

Yet I respect the demonstration
Of your humility and faith.
I don't expect your admiration,
Or love, or brotherly embrace,

But there is no rhyme or reason
For you to scorn my race and creed:
Jew-hatred is no more in season—
To each his own stock and heed!

Although not kin, we aren't strangers—
We come from the same religious root
(I realize such statement's dangers,
Though nowadays it sounds moot...):

The Christian Teachings start in ours—
The Jews endowed the world with Bible,
Like you we worship Highest Powers,
And Jesus Christ was a Rabbi...

The Boat of My Life

Yakov Zilberberg

The boat of my life is drifting to a shore...
The waters underneath are dangerously shallow,
The helmsman ceased to be a sharp and lively fellow,
The engine wouldn't run full power anymore...

Yet once upon a time through storms, and hails, and blizzards
She came alive—all durable and strong,
As if designed and built by fairies or by wizards,
As hard as rock, as bright as life's triumphant song!

While young and arrogant, she was distinctly sure
Of immortality (or of—at least—long living),
Her actions wild, and brash, and unforgiving,
Precipitous, presumptuous, immature...

But years went by—so quickly, so non-stop—
And wisdom crept into her mind, unfettered,
So she discovered things that really mattered:
Compassion, care, and children's love on top...

And thus she grew mature, my boat—no doubt.
But now its strength keeps seeping through the seams...
The shores come closer—though for some time, it seems,
Her song shall still be heard—all clear, alive, and loud!

Mrs. Dean

Joan Longwell

Mrs. Dean stands on a small hill of garbage, children's toys and ashes. "Sherry!" She calls out. Shrieks really. Her voice is still raw from last night's fight with her husband. She raises a hand to her brow. The hand is lined, designed and from a distance the tattoo looks like ground ivy gone crazy, up her knuckles to her wrist, branching out almost to the crook in her arm. She's a woman full of regrets, stone-dunked in anger and badly spent moments, judgments clashing with her common sense. Judgments borne in the heat of need or greed. She rubs her toe in the ashes. Four children spit out from a couple who are still unsure whether it's worth the effort to live. *You keep making them and we keep taking them, Mrs. Dean.* That was from Miss Cappelo, and the words still stung as if she said them today or last week. She crushes her cigarette out and squints at the road. Off in the distance, a white Chevrolet is raising dust as it travels down the yellow road.

Towards her.

It's coming for her. To check on how she's doing. She's furious now because Miss Cappelo's visit is unannounced. Miss Cappelo promised she'd call before she came out next time. Sherry didn't clean up the yard like she should have. Chrissy didn't do the dishes like she should have. Bill was asleep on the couch, the bastard. The two younger ones are playing on the hill, running around among the chaos of broken toys and ripped garbage bags. *They should be in school, Mrs. Dean. You know that. The school says they've been absent for the last three weeks.* She stares at the Chevrolet. *What happened to our plan, Mrs. Dean?* She races around the hill now, feverishly, trying to pick up the trash. The children stare, frightened by the tears streaming down her face. They're always doing something wrong, but now

they don't know what they did to upset her. She shrieks, "Get into the house and do the dishes!" and they leap up, electrified by the tone of her voice. The white car is coming closer and through the dust and the heat she can see two passengers. One is a man. She squints through her tears at him. He is a bad omen, a sign of another afternoon gone sour. She can't move, she's so worried, so she holds the torn garbage bag and stares. The Chevrolet pulls into the yard. Miss Cappello opens the car door and the Chevrolet shimmers in a veil of light and dust, on this otherwise listless August day.

Tidal Wave

Mark Levine

Ars Longa, Vita Brevis

I spent the four days after the horror of 9/11 keeping a music workshop date at an inn on the coast of Maine. Four of us string players lived together in a cottage and played in parallel with other groups, moved this way and that by seasoned coaches. Our metaphor was the family: the directing, leading first violin, the determinedly supportive second violin, the richly embellishing viola, the steadying voice of the Ocello; the transcendence was the miracle of art, in this instance, drowning out and attempting to make sense of a great tragedy. Somewhere in the curling fog outside, the church steeple had come crashing down in the village square.

In this setting, the pain of discovery was especially intense: of the secret of shaping together melodic and rhythmic and textural moments, of providing significance to every sound (like remembering to feed all the children); of planning the weight and location and direction of a bow on the string, and of the comings together and fallings apart of themes and cadences. We paused to plan every rising of a main voice or the chiming in of a secondary voice. We worshipped at the altar of balance and resurrection, found justice in a stroke or an understatement.

We had withdrawn for renewal, but not quite for escape. The sea beyond our cottage throbbed in anguish. Down the coast in New York City, our families writhed in pain. The first violinist and his wife at home had learned finally, late that September 11,

that their financial worker son had escaped the Towers of his work to New Jersey and would stay away. After initial hesitation, the second violinist's son and daughter in law flew as planned to LaGuardia Airport from work in Germany. The violist's daughter and son-in law were staying out of crumbling finance offices near the epicenter. My first cousin's son had fled from the lower floors of the first tower just in time, helping a family escape past Battery Park, wisps of smoke following them to the East River. Mornings and evenings, we read the papers and listened to NPR to track the plummets and recoveries from the incursion--without television, a blessing.

Holding the horror at bay, we had momentarily brought peace to our world in art: with beauty as goal, our loving family navigating the waves. Here we might eschew the fracturing of the bond, the alienation that could send the plane of our playing through the Tower again and again and shred life and limb. Somewhere in our sound was the eternal lesson: art lasts, life is brief.

Remaking or Holding On

How surrealistic the world has become in a short week and a half! A student in my Sociology class, an earnest and strong criminal justice major, reported that we shall double our police force now; seriously, he intoned ³we will become a military state. The young man pestering me on the phone about my MCI WorldCom bill, urged me to pay by credit card: now that we are at war, mail delivery will take longer. Why did I feel as if I were on stage set?

A look back in history provided a taste. Two references: *Misgivings*, a Melville poem, written on the eve of the Civil War, seemed all too contemporary, The role modeling film could be *Mrs. Miniver*. Walter Pidgeon, Greer Garson living through the blitz and the early mobilization of 1940's England. The proclamation is not: the world will never be the same, but we will hold onto our traditions and our values. Our President's model is more the Alamo, or Custer's Last Stand. The young generation's cry is for a new world order, perhaps military.

The Harder they Fall

New York was my city almost two thirds of my life, and remains a refuge, a standard, a delight, a stimulant, a source of vitality. Too grand to fail, now wounded like a great Leviathan, under momentarily, but preparing to surface again. I call up in my mind each crash of a national tower over past years: John and Robert and Martin and Malcolm and others. Now the numbers were multiplied, but the sentiment remained shock; I wept once again.

Mickey

Testing one's point of view in the contrarian forge still yields an edge. At a presentation yesterday at my state University, the now academic Mickey Edwards (former Republican Congressman) responded to my question: Where is Wayne Morse? Where is I.F. Stone? Two great truthsayers of yesteryear; and replied Representative Edwards: we are now centrist, no left, no right, as if that could wash away dialectic, make us stop questioning. I thanked my stars for Rep. Barbara Lee (remember her?). Save the unanimous vote for heaven!

I read him some lines of the venerable writer Susan Sontag's straightforward piece in the black cover current New Yorker. In it, she deplores our being kept in the dark, given patriotic pabulum, and not helped to understand where the country fits into the larger world picture. She is a fine writer, Mickey said, but (with an air of superiority) not a political scientist.

My friends and I were impressed with President Bush's firm speech (parsed by others, but delivered by him, a wise use of a Cabinet): good for the nation, for its spirit. I was more taken with his hugging and touching the cheek of the opposition members just after he spoke. More like a Venus and Serena of the recent U.S. Tennis Open, who placed family, relationship, love before winning.

Two Deaths

Jesse Heines

On Friday, September 14, 2001, I learned that, as I had been expecting, my mother's doctor felt that she had only a few more days to live. Naturally, I went to her bedside. On the same day, I learned that, totally unexpectedly, my friend and scuba diving buddy Chuck Jones had been on American Flight 11 that slammed into the World Trade Center. There was nowhere to go. The juxtaposition of these two deaths brought home for me a telling, personal perspective on the scope of the September 11 tragedy that I share here with you.

DOROTHY HEINES 1918-2001

died surrounded by family
passed in peace, controlled and orderly
spent her last moments flooded with love
said good-bye to her loved ones and her
loved ones had a chance to say good-bye to her
lived a life full of memories, now naturally completed
her passing was sad, but filled with grace
her family has arranged a final resting place
for her remains
taken by angels' hands
now in God's hands

CHUCK JONES 1953-2001

died surrounded by strangers
passed in flames, uncontrolled and chaotic
spent his last moments flooded in terror
was ripped from his loved ones without a chance
for anyone to say good-bye
lived a life full of promise,
snuffed out in its prime
his passing was tragic, filled with horror
his family is not even left with any remains to bury
taken by madmen's hands
now in God's hands

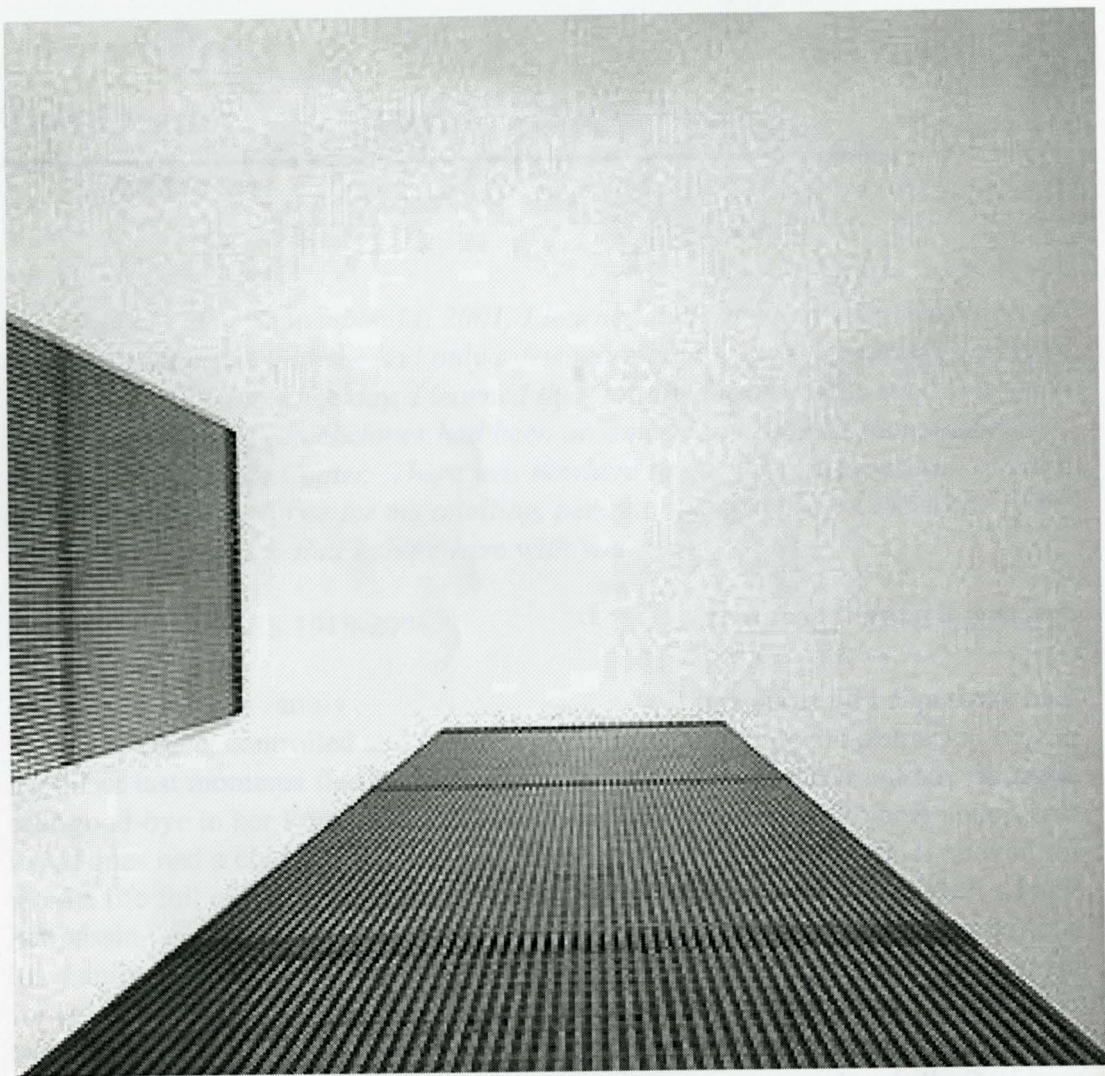


Photo by : Robert Blackie, Jr.

The Offering is an annual production of the University of Massachusetts, Lowell Literary Society. Submissions are accepted from all university students, staff, faculty and alumni.

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***The Offering* 2002**

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